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The Peninsula: Emerging Regional Kingdoms
C. AD 500-900

Pallavas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas

With the passing of the Guptas and their immediate successors in northern India, historical interest shirts southwards to the Deccan and to the area referred to as Tamilaham. The more significant events of the period took place south of the Vindhyas in spheres other than the purely political. The institutions of south India were being established at this time and were to maintain a striking continuity. The polity of chiefships and small kingdoms from earlier times gave way to large kingdoms. There were some parallels with changes in northern India, but there were also significant differences. The courts of the peninsula reflected an interface between the assertion of local cultures and that of the expanding Sanskritic culture. The process can be seen in various spheres, but perhaps most clearly in the language of the inscriptions. The early inscriptions had been in Tamil. Later, Prakrit and Sanskrit were also used, but in the south Tamil soon predominated, until finally the main corpus was in Tamil and the more formulaic sections in Sanskrit. Similarly, inscriptions in other parts of the peninsula used Sanskrit and Kannada. Parallel to this in some ways was the juxtaposition of Vedic Brahmanism with what has come to be called the Tamil devotional movement. The kingdoms of the western Deccan maintained their historical role of bridging the north and the south, facilitating the transmission of ideas between the two. But it is clear from architectural history that this was not a passive role, as the Deccan style, or Vesara, provided forms and variants among what have come to be called the Nagara, or northern style, and the Dravida, or southern style.

The political history of the Deccan and further south focused on the long years of conflict between two geographical regions, the western Deccan and Tamilaham – the vast plateau areas enclosed by mountains along the coasts on the one hand, and the fertile plain south of Chennai on the other. Most of the rivers in the region rise in the west and flow into the Bay of Bengal. The division of the peninsula into the plateau kingdoms on the west and the coastal kingdoms on the east increased the desire of each to control the entire waterway, particularly the Godavari and Krishna Rivers. Vengi, lying between the Godavari and Krishna Deltas, was frequently a bone of contention, together with the fertile Raichur *doab* further inland. The conflict was as much political as economic, and consequently it continued through the centuries despite the fortunes of particular dynasties. What appears to be a complex interplay of the rise and fall of kingdoms is not so complex when viewed from a geopolitical perspective. The deltas were prime agricultural lands and the eastern coast, dotted with Buddhist centres by now, was active in trade networks. In the absence of vast areas of fertile plains, large agrarian-based kingdoms were less effective as polities, and the formation of smaller, regional kingdoms was an early and consistent feature. Thus, the kingdoms of the peninsula

were probably oriented to regional loyalties earlier than in the north.

The Vakatakas in the western Deccan gave way to Chalukya power with a base in Vatapi/Badami. A series of kingdoms, south from the eastern Deccan, included those ruled by the Shalankayanas and later the eastern Chalukyas; the Ikshvakus in the Krishna-Gunrur region, with Nagarjunakonda and Dharanikota as important centres, and with the Vishnukundins ruling close by. Control over Karnataka was divided between the Kadambas, Nolambas and Gangas. This was again an interplay between people of the hills and the forests with those settled in the plains. Granite hillocks were useful bases for fortresses. Kadamba control extended to the Konkan, and the Eastcn Gangas ruled in Orissa. Other dynasties bordering on the eastern Deccan were the Sharabapuriyas and the Panduvamshis. Some dynasties had been founded by brahmans who had received grants of land and used these as nuclei which became small kingdoms. Hence the claim that some were of the *brahma-kshatra* caste – brahmans performing *kshatriya* functions or who could claim mixed brahman and *kshatriya* ancestry.

Further south in the Tamilaham area, the control of the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas over their respective states was rocked by the rise of the Kalabhras. The origins of the latter are unknown and this is another example of a dynasty rising from obscurity, which became a trend in the subcontinent. The Kalabhras are said to have been hill tribes, but soon became sufficiently settled to extend patronage to Buddhists and Jainas. Possibly this is why they were reviled in later texts, some of which were of brahman authorship. The change encouraged the breaking down of the system of clan-based societies. This introduced a more impersonal rule through kingship, with the major dynasties of the Pallavas and the Pandyas in the east and the Cheras/Perumal in Kerala.

For 300 years after the mid-sixth century three major kingdoms were in conflict. These were the Chalukyas of Badami, the Pallavas of Kanchipuram and the Pandyas of Madurai, all seeking to control the fertile tracts. The Chalukyas first came into prominence as subordinate rulers of the Kadambas, from whom they broke away. The Chalukya base was in northern Karnataka at Vatapi/Badami and the adjacent Aihole, from where they moved northwards to annex the former kingdom of the Vakatakas, centred in the Upper Godavari. They also annexed some western coastal areas, presumably because these now hosted the traders from across the Arabian Sea. The power from the north was contained through the defeat of Harsha at the Narmada, by the Chalukya King Pulakeshin II, an event repeatedly referred to with pride in later Chalukya inscriptions. The eastern part of the Satavahana kingdom, the deltas of the Krishna and the Godavari, had been conquered by the Ikshvaku dynasty in the third century AD. Ikshvaku rule ended with the conquest of this region by the Pallavas. The latter were also responsible for the overthrow of the Kadamba rulers and the annexation of their kingdom, which lay to the south of the Chalukya kingdom.

The origin of the Pallavas remains a matter of debate. Some time ago it was suggested that Pallava is a variant of Pahlava (Parthian), and that the Pallavas were originally Patthians who moved from western India to the eastern coast of the peninsula during the wars between the Shakas and the Satavahanas in the second century AD. This seems unlikely, since there was no reference to Pallavas/Pahlavas travelling to the south. Another tradition weaves a romantic story round the name. A prince fell in love with a Naga princess of the netherworld. When he finally had to leave her, he told her that if she set their child adrift with a young creeper or twig tied to its body he would recognize the child on finding it and would bestow part of the kingdom on the child. The princess did so, and the child was duly recognized and installed as the founder of the Pallava – literally, a young twig -dynasty. The territory over which the Pallavas ruled was called Tondainadu and this name reiterates the association with a twig. Naga chiefs were symbols of local power, so the story may reflect the likelihood of initial Pallava rule involving ascendancy over many continuing chiefships.

This legend is not unique to the Pallavas, for a similar story is told about the Khmer kings of Cambodia, though possibly it was borrowed from the Pallava legend. Ambiguity of status is met with fairly often in the origin myths of dynasties of the subcontinent. Rituals of a particular kind performed by ritual specialists were prescribed to clear the ambiguity, and genealogical connections were made in order to provide high status. The biography of a later king, encapsulated in an inscription, claimed a descent from the brahman Ashvatthama and a mother who was an *apsara,* a celestial woman.

It is also said that the original Pallava was the ancestor to the King, Ashoka-varman, presumably the Mauryan King, Ashoka. Buddhist tradition maintained that he built the stupa in the vicinity of Kanchipuram. He was also now being associated with the concept of the Buddhist *chakravartin* and was much revered. In making the connection with Pallava ancestry, it appears the intention was to draw on the Buddhist tradition that still had a presence in the area. The Buddha had been mentioned as an *avatara* of Vishnu in another inscription.

The earliest surviving records of the Pallavas are inscriptions issued when the Pallavas were still a local dynasty ruling at Kanchipuram. The later inscriptions were issued when the dynasty controlled Tamil-nadu. At that time it became the first dynasty of real consequence in the region, which led to earlier historians calling it the 'imperial Pallavas'. According to one of the early inscriptions the Pallava king performed various Vedic sacrifices, including the *ashvamedha.* These ceremonies, relatively new to the local population, were probably seen as largely symbolic, emphasizing the power associated with ritual in Sanskritic culture. The Ikshvaku kings are said to have distributed ox-ploughs in an effort to clear and settle wasteland. The early Pallavas may have encouraged a similar enterprise, the conversion to agriculture bringing in enhanced revenue. The Pallava kingdom was regarded as rich, and was therefore much targeted. Pallava sources refer to the subordinate rulers, Udayana and Prithvi-vyagraha, as chiefs of the Shabara and the Nishada. The latter were almost generic names for hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivators living in the forest, normally beyond the pale of caste society. This would again suggest that the Pallava state annexed forested areas and cleared them for cultivation, or as sources for forest produce such as timber, elephants and semi-precious stones. The adoption of Sanskritic names by these chiefs is a pointer to their acculturation.

Among the later group of Pallava rulers, Mahendra-varman I (600-630) was responsible for the growing political strength of the Pallavas. He also took on the role of arbiter and patron of early Tamil culture. He was a contemporary of the Chalukya ruler Pulakeshin II and of Harsha of Thanesar and, like the latter, was a dramatist and poet of some standing, being the author of a play, the comedy entitled *Mattavilasa-prahasana (The Delight of the Drunkards*). Associating kings with literary accomplishments became another gauge of Sanskritic learning, particularly when reflecting courtly culture. Some of the finest, even if small, rock-cut temples were hewn during his reign, including those at Mahabalipuram/Mamallapuram. Mahendra-varman is said to have begun life as a Jaina, but was converted to Shaivism by Appar, and the claim was that the conversion eroded the patronage to Jainism in Tamil-nadu.

But his accomplishments were not restricted to writing comedies and patronizing the building of temples, for wars had also to be fought. His northern contemporary Harsha was too far away for there to be conflict, but nearer home was the recently established Chalukya power, and Pulakeshin II was determined to confine the ambition of the Pallavas and prevent their control over Vengi. This was to start a long series of Chalukya-Pallava wars, which ceased for a while on the termination of the two dynasties but started again with the rise of their successors. Pulakeshin's ambition did not rest with the control of the western Deccan. He tested the strength of his army by defeating the Kadambas and the Gangas to the south, and this led him to an equally successful attack on Andhra. He also faced and

defeated the army of Harsha on the banks of the Narmada, pressing on to receive the submission of Lara, Malwa and Gujarat in western India. On returning to Badami he conducted another successful campaign, this time against Mahendra-varman the Pallava, resulting in the Chalukya acquisition of some of the northern Pallava provinces. An inscription at Aihole recording the achievements of Pulakeshin II is among the finest literary documents in the category of archival texts.

The defeat of the Pallava was not to remain unavenged. Mahendra-varman had died, but his successor Narasimha-varman I was determined to reconquer lost territory, and this he succeeded in doing. Narasimha-varman swept into the Chalukya capital, and his occupation of the city justified his claim to the title of *Vatapikonda,* 'the Conqueror of Vatapi'. Mahabalipuram was further embellished with elegant temples. The next move was to be made by the Chalukyas, but a twelve-year interregnum in the Chalukya dynasty led to a respite from war. Meanwhile, the Pallavas had been involved in naval warfare to support their ally, the King of Sri Lanka, who was trying to regain his recently lost throne and in which he was eventually successful. The interaction between Tamil-nadu and Sri Lanka that began earlier with similarities in megalithic settlements was to continue through history, as would be expected from close neighbours.

The Chalukyas were trying to unite a divided kingdom and curb the ambitions of their subordinates. In 655 one of the sons of Pulakeshin succeeded in bringing about a semblance of unity, and the power of the Chalukyas was gradually restored with the regaining of the territory lost to the Pallavas. The Chalukya provinces north of the Narmada River were ruled by a prince of the main family whose descendants were later referred to as the Lata Chalukyas, named after the region they ruled and who were still loyal and as yet not troublesome. The Chalukya king was now free to give his attention to the Pallavas, who had been preparing for a renewal of the war. After a long-drawn-out campaign the Pallavas once more swept into Vatapi. The losses were heavy on both sides, according to a graphic description of the battle in a Pallava grant found in the vicinity of Kanchi. Doubtless this was generally the case, given that the armies of the Pallavas and the Chalukyas were equally matched and victory was usually achieved by a narrow margin. The inability of each to hold the other's territory after annexing it would point to a precarious balance in military strength and political authority.

Among the achievements of Narasimha-varman II, more frequently referred to as Rajasimha, was the building of the exquisite shore temple at Mahabalipuram and the temple now known as Kailasanatha at Kanchipuram. The latter marks a turning-point away from what was earlier a religious centre dominated by Buddhists. One of the by-products of major military campaigns was that famous icons were sometimes taken from royal temples as a trophy by the victors. Frequently, masons, builders and artisans were also taken back to work on the temples in the capital of the victor. Artistic styles therefore tended to merge on occasion.

But this seemingly halcyon period ended in 731, with the Chalukyas and the Gangas uniting in an attack on the Pallavas. The reigning king died and, there being no direct heir, the council of ministers in consultation with the college of priests appointed a member of the collateral branch of the family, who reigned as Nandi-varman Q. The boy king was supported by the Bhagavata faction at the court, whereas earlier the Shaiva faction had been powerful. The Chalukyas had avenged their earlier defeat in the usual manner by occupying Kanchi. The Pallavas would now be expected to counter-attack, but at this point there was a change in the situation, with the southern neighbours of the Pallavas joining in the conflict. These were the Pandyas of Madurai, and they were not in sympathy with the Pallava cause although their enmity was less intense than that of the Chalukyas. The Pandyas had established their position in southern Tamil-nadu by the sixth century, and they were to remain in control of this region for many centuries. Their effectiveness varied according to their relations with the other

powers. Despite the Pandyas harassing their northern neighbours they could never obliterate the power of the latter.

In Kerala, on the west coast, brahman settlement grew in various agriculturally rich areas, and these were a source of support to the Makotai kingdom in the Periyar Valley. But the wealth and standing of Kerala derived more from maritime trade. In Kerala, too, brahman migrants were later arrivals and had to function with cultures not altogether familiar. As usual, local recruitment into brahman ranks was inevitable, and adjustments also had to be made with local kinship systems. The adjustment to matrilineal societies, for instance, in the relationship between Nambudri brahmans and Nair landowners, took a different form from those recognizable in other parts of the subcontinent.

The earlier contacts between the east and west coasts of south India continued in the relations between the Pallavas and the Perumal dynasty of Kerala. The motive was largely trade with west Asia, a trade that others were also anxious to tap. Trade with the eastern Roman Empire had declined, but there continued to be a demand for pepper and spices in Europe. It had been kept going by Arab traders supplying items to the markets of Byzantium. The Malabar and Konkan coast had settlements of Arabs who were part of this trade. Unlike earlier traders linked to the Roman trade, the Arabs settled permanently in the coastal regions of the west and the south from about the eighth and ninth centuries. They were welcomed, given land for trading stations and left free to practise their religion, as had been the convention with Christians earlier in south India. However, they were scarcely regarded as new arrivals, for even in pre-Islamic times there had been traffic between the west coast and the Arabian peninsula. The present-day Mappilas or Malabar Muslims are descendants of these settlers, as are the Navayats who have emerged from those settled amid the Jaina trading communities of the Konkan.

Among the more interesting aspects of Arab settlements along the west coast is that each group adopted some of the customary law, and even some forms of worship, from the local community with whom they had the closest contact. Thus there is a difference in the Islam practised by the Khojas and Bohras of Gujarat, the Navayats of the Konkan and the Mappilas of Malabar. Matriliny and matrilocality, for example, were characteristic of the Mappilas but not of the others. These customs appear to have been borrowed from the local Nair practice, since they would otherwise seem unacceptable to conservative Islam. Being mainly traders, the Muslim Arabs settled along the western coast were not primarily concerned with acquiring political power or making large-scale conversions to Islam. Adjustments with local society were therefore not acrimonious. Arab authors describe the Arabs settled in India as *bayasirah,* which may suggest people from southern Arabia.

In the seventh century, Arab armies had invaded Persia. Some Zoroastrians were converted to Islam and some preferred to migrate to India, which they did from the early eighth century. They too came to western India where they already had trading contacts, and established large settlements to the north of Mumbai, such as the one at Sanjan. Their descendants founded a community later known as Parsi, reflecting the land of their origin and their language. Some settled in rural areas but close to centres of trade; others were more active in the trading circuits of the time. Arab officers working for the Rashtrakuta administration in the ninth century were appointed in the Sanjan area, which was important to commercial relations with west Asia. The settlement seems to have been peaceful. Since the Arabs were the people from whom the Zoroastrians are said to have fled, some of the migration to India may have been linked to pursuing commercial interests rather than solely to avoiding religious persecution.

The Arabs had however occupied Sind in the eighth century and established footholds in western India, both of which encouraged their advance towards Chalukya territory in an effort to control the

ports of the west coast. The Lata Chalukyas managed to hold them back, thus allowing their southern neighbours time to arm themselves. The immediate danger from the Arabs passed, but the Chalukyas were faced with an even more formidable threat. Dantidurga, one of their subordinates, who was a high official in the administration, declared his independence, and by slow stages his family overthrew the Chalukyas to establish a new dynasty – the Rashtrakutas. The family was based in the Gulbarga region, with their centre of power located in what came to be called Manyakheta. Dantidurga was the father-in-law of Nandi-varman and helped him regain Kanchi, an act commemorated by the Pallava King in the building of the Vaikuntha Perumal temple, almost as a counterpoint to the Kailasanatha temple. The temple marked the end of the King's exile and his return to power. The Pallavas survived the Chalukyas by about a century, but with declining authority during the ninth century. The Pallava line was terminated by the last of the Pallavas being assassinated by a subordinate functionary.

The Rashtrakuta kingdom battened on the weakness of the other kingdoms. The Pallavas were in decline, and their successors, the Cholas, had not yet entered the fray. There was no power in northern India strong enough to interfere with the affairs of the Deccan. The geographical position of the Rashtrakutas led to their involvement in wars and alliances with both the northern and, more frequently, the southern kingdoms. The Rashtrakutas interfered effectively in the politics of Kanauj and this interference cost them many a campaign, though they did gain possession of Kanauj for a brief period in the early tenth century.

But the Rashtrakutas had the advantage of controlling a large part of the western seaboard and therefore the trade with west Asia, particularly with the Arabs. They referred to the Arabs as Tajiks, employing them as officers and even governors of their administrative districts in coastal areas. One of these governors, named Madhumati – thought to be a Sanskritization of the name Mohammad – granted land to a wealthy brahman *matha.* The inscription also states that he controlled many of the harbour officers on behalf of the Rashtrakutas.

Dantidurga established the kingdom in about 753, and was succeeded by Krishna I whose fame is associated with the remarkable rock-cut temple at Ellora, known as the Kailasa temple. Amoghavarsha is probably the best remembered of the Rashtrakuta kings. His long reign (814-80) was militarily not brilliant although he strengthened the core area at Manyakheta. His patronage of the Jaina religion and of Shaivism provided both with considerable support. He was the author of a work on poetics in Kannada, the *Kavirajamarga,* illustrating once again the interest taken by royalty in literature. The tenth-century ruler, Krishna III, was the last of the major Rashtrakuta rulers.

Amoghavarsha's persistent problem had been the threat of rebellion by subordinate rulers under his suzerainty and this was never eliminated. The Chalukyas, reduced to subordinate status, were once again asserting themselves. They were soon to overthrow the Rashtrakutas and install themselves as the rulers, bringing the wheel round full circle. The ambitions of another family, the Shilaharas, began to take shape although they too had been subordinates of the Rashtrakutas. Meanwhile, the rising power of the Cholas in Tamil-nadu was another threat to the independence of the Rashtrakuta kingdom. The first half of the tenth century saw the Rashtrakutas still in the ascendant, with one of their kings claiming the title 'conqueror of Kanchi'. But this was a short-lived claim. By the end of the tenth century, the new rulers of Kanchi and the Chalukyas had between them brought the Rashtrakuta dynasty to an end, and the second line of Chalukyas was ruling the kingdom of the Rashtrakutas.

Political Economies of the Peninsula

Dynasties tend to see-saw when they are equally matched, as in the peninsula. A relatively less obtrusive governmental system encouraged local autonomy in village and district administration, without too much interference from the capital. This autonomy did not divest the state of authority.Instead it was effective in matters of administration and collection of revenue. It was preserved to a considerable degree in Tamil-nadu, where the tradition was actively maintained for many centuries.

Kings took high-sounding titles, some of which, such as *maharajadhiraja,* were familiar from northern usage. Others were of local invention, such as *dharma-maharaja,* great king ruling in accordance with the *dharma.* Kings were required to rescue and protect *dharma* since it was believed to be ebbing away in the Kali Age. The more unusual *aggitoma-vajapeya-assamedha-yaji,* he who has performed the *agnishtoma, vajapeya* and *ashvamedha* sacrifices, sounds like a self-conscious insistence on conformity with Vedic practices prescribed for kingship. Many inscriptions now carried *prashastis,* eulogies, of the king. This had a political purpose, for, with the strengthening of monarchy, the king had to be projected as extraordinary.

In theory, the king was the supreme arbiter of justice, but it is more likely that conflicts were settled at the local level. He was assisted by a group of ministers, and in the later Pallava period this ministerial council played a prominent part in state policy. Some of the ministers bore semi-royal titles, and may have been appointed from the tributary rulers, landed magnates and others who had access to power through administration and economic control over revenue. Among the latter, some may have begun as tenants with large holdings, gradually assuming positions of authority. The term 'feudatory', used for those who controlled power at the local level and who had a subordinate relationship with the king, covers a generally prevailing situation, but it has the disadvantage that in earlier historical writing it has often been taken as suggestive of a similarity with European feudalism. Irrespective of similarities, the nature of power held by such persons differs over space and time in the subcontinent. It might therefore be better to mention the specific categories.

The names given to some administrative units went back to the Mauryan period, such as *ahara, vishaya* and *rashtra,* and in Tamil-nadu the basic unit continued to be the *nadu.* There was a hierarchy of officials in charge of provincial administration who worked with local autonomous institutions, largely in an advisory capacity. These institutions appear to have been more common in the south than in northern India during this period. They were built on local relationships of caste, profession and religious sect. Frequent meetings or assemblies were essential to their functioning. Assemblies were of many varieties and at many levels, and could include those of merchant guilds, craftsmen and artisans – weavers, oil-mongers and suchlike – as well as students, ascetics and priests. The smaller groups were chosen by lot from among the eligible persons, and worked in a manner somewhat analogous to modern committees, each group having its specific function.

In the village the basic assembly was the *sabha,* which was concerned with all matters relating to the village: temple property and endowments of various kinds; irrigation; cultivated land; punishment of crime; the keeping of a census and other necessary records. The *sabha* was a formal institution but it worked closely with the *ur,* a gathering of the leaders of the area controlled by non-brahman cultivators. Beyond the *ur* was the *cheri,* the habitat of those regarded as outside the boundaries of caste. A council of landowners worked with the administration of the *nadu.* The *nagaram* was

largely a collectivity of traders. Villages which were populated mainly by brahmans have sometimes preserved records of the functioning of assemblies and councils. Records of assemblies in other villages have not survived. This has led to the suggestion that these autonomous bodies were restricted to the former villages. But this does not necessarily follow. If village assemblies were found useful in a particular set of villages, it is likely they would become more common in other villages of that region. The link between the village assembly and the official administration was the headman of the village, who acted both as the leader of the village and the mediator with the government.

Further north in the Deccan there was less autonomy in administrative institutions. In the Chalukya domains government officers were more involved in routine administration, even at the village level. Village assemblies functioned under the paternalistic eye of the official, and the role of the headman as the leader of the village was of a more formal nature. From the eighth century onwards some of the Deccan rulers adopted administrative divisions where groups of ten or twelve villages were formed into larger units.

The expansion of political power was largely based on increased revenue from the introduction of agriculture in areas previously treated as wasteland. One mechanism for doing this was by making grants to brahmans and to temples. This differed from the earlier period. Initially brahmans from elsewhere were invited to settle locally and in the process to convert land to agriculture. The process also involved the conversion of local societies to peasant cultivators in areas where such cultivators had not existed before. The settlement of migrant cultivators is not recorded, although they probably came as and when it was feasible. They would have brought only their labour and not the ideological backing that the rulers received from brahman grantees. The latter included the performance of Vedic sacrifices, which carried echoes of the period of state formation in the first millennium BC. The transition from chiefship to kingship involved the performance of these elaborate rituals that also permitted some claim to association with divinity. In some ways this was both a replay of earlier times and the continuation of a historical tradition. Once the kingdoms were well established the rituals were performed less frequently, or else largely as statements of conformity.

There was a gradual shift from ruling through chiefs to ruling through landed intermediaries, and through temples performing a similar role. The economy was being restructured in areas where there were frequent grants of land. Brahmanical legitimation and the support of the temple networks were sought. *Varna* rules were introduced, but with limited success except among the brahmans. The support for orthodoxy among brahmans was probably related to their dependency on the *velalas,* the other landowners and peasants, who were culturally distinctive and whom the brahmans tried to subordinate by giving them the status of *shudras.* But those among the latter who were landowners also had power.

Other than the land privately owned, the remainder was mostly regarded as crown land. The king could make revenue grants to his officers and land grants to brahmans, or else continue to have the land cultivated by small-scale cultivators and landlords who paid taxes. Tenancies in the latter situation were by their nature not permanent. Private landowners could buy and sell land or gift it for religious purposes. Grants to officers of either land or revenue from land were largely in lieu of salaries, and did not stipulate that the grantee had to provision troops or give a percentage of the revenue to the state.

Grants were usually in perpetuity and their frequency increased over time. Although there is an impression that grants were the predominant form of organizing agriculture, this was not the case everywhere. As elsewhere in the subcontinent, cultivators had existed prior to their land becoming

part of a grant. An agreement between the state and the peasant regarding assessment and taxes was either a continuation of the existing norm or required new arrangements. Such agreements were obviously more favourable to the state than to the cultivator. If such land became part of a royal grant then there would be more complex terms and conditions, given the intervention of an intermediary between the state and the peasant. The intermediary's right to alienate or inherit this land depended on the terms of the grant.

The status of the village and the tenures varied and eventually three kinds came to prevail. The most frequent was the village with an inter-caste population paying taxes to the king on the amount of land cultivated, together with its produce and taxes from other occupations. Another category included grants of various kinds to individuals or particular groups, generally brahmans, although the king could choose to make a grant to someone else. The *brahmadeya* villages were created when either the entire village or some lands of the village were donated to a single brahman or a group of brahmans. These grantees were prosperous because the brahmans normally did not pay tax and the holdings could be much larger than usual. The *agrahara* grant applied to a village consisting of a settlement of brahmans, the land being given to them as a grant and exempt from tax, but the brahmans could provide free education locally if they so wished. The third kind were the *devadana/devadeya,* donated to the god – lands or villages functioning in a similar manner to the first category, except that their cultivators were tenants of a temple. The revenue from these villages was donated to the temple, and was consequently received by the temple authorities rather than the state. The temple authorities assisted the village by providing employment for the villagers. This last category of villages gained greater significance in later centuries when the temples became the central institutions of rural life. During the Pallava period the first two types of villages were predominant.

The village included the homes of the villagers, gardens, irrigation works – mainly tanks or wells – cattle enclosures, wastelands, the village common, forests surrounding the village, streams passing through the village lands, the temple and the temple lands, the cremation ground, and the 'wet' (irrigated) and 'dry' lands under cultivation. Land owned in common and used for specific purposes, such as that kept for sifting paddy, was also included. Rice was the staple crop, used as both a unit of barter and a commercial crop when harvested in surplus. There were extensive coconut palm plantations, the produce of the tree being put to varied use. Both the palmyra and the areca palm were cultivated, the latter largely for the export of areca nuts. Groves of mangoes and plantains were a regular feature of the landscape. Oil extracted from the seeds of cotton and gingelly were much in demand.

A special category of land, *eripatti,* or tank land, is mentioned. Donated by individuals, the revenue from this land was set apart for the maintenance of the village tank. This indicates the dependence of the village on tank irrigation, although irrigation with water from wells was next in importance. Rainwater increased the volume stored in the tank so that land could be irrigated during the long, dry spell each year. The tank, lined with brick or stone, was built and maintained through the co-operative effort of the village, and its water shared by the cultivators. Inscriptions from the Pallava period pertaining to rural affairs refer to the upkeep of such tanks. Water was taken from the tank by water lifts to canals, and these were fitted with stone sluices to regulate the water level and prevent an overflow at the source. A special tank committee appointed by the village supervised the distribution of water for irrigation. Water taken in excess of the amount permitted to a particular cultivator was taxed.

Information on land tenures and taxation is available from the detailed records in the grants, which have survived mainly on copper plates. There were two categories of taxes levied in the village: the

land revenue paid by the cultivator to the state varied from one-sixth to one-tenth of the produce of the land, and was collected by the village and paid to the state collector; the second category consisted of local taxes, also collected in the village but utilized for services in the village and its environs, ranging from the repair of irrigation works to the renovation or decoration of the temple. The state land tax was low and revenue was supplemented by additional taxes on draught cattle, toddy-drawers, marriage parties, potters, goldsmiths, washermen, textile-manufacturers, weavers, brokers, letter-carriers and the makers of *ghi* (clarified butter). Unfortunately, the percentage of tax was not always indicated and it doubtless varied according to the object taxed. Royal revenue came almost exclusively from rural sources, mercantile and urban institutions being as yet less intensively tapped.

An example of a land grant engraved and preserved on copper plate is quoted below. The eleven plates on which it is inscribed were found near a village in the vicinity of Pondicherry in 1879. The plates were strung on a ring of copper, the two ends of which were soldered and stamped with a royal seal depicting a bull and a *lingam* – the Pallava symbol. It records the grant of a village made in the twenty-second year of the King Nandi-varman (AD 753) and commences with a eulogy of the king in Sanskrit, followed by the details of the grant in Tamil and a concluding verse in Sanskrit. The grant appears to have been made to the preceptor of the king and the person who would have performed various rituals for him, including those pertaining to the Bhagavata sect. The temple built by the king would have been both a gesture honouring his preceptor, as well as a statement of his own political authority. The quotation below is from the Tamil section, and it is significant that the most relevant sections of these grants were in Tamil rather than Sanskrit.

The author of the above eulogy was Trivikrama. The above is an order of the king dated in the twenty-second year of his reign. Let the inhabitants of Urrukkattukottam see. Having seen the order which was issued after the king had been pleased to give Kodukalli village of our country – having expropriated the former owners at the request of Brahmayuvaraja, having appointed Ghorasharman as the effector of the grant, having excluded previous grants to temples and grants to brahmans, having excluded the houses of the cultivators to the extent of altogether two *patti* [a measure of land] – as a *brahmadeya* (grant) to Shettiranga Somayajin [Shettiranga, who performs the Soma sacrifice], who belongs to the Bharadvaja *gotra* [a brahman exogamous sept], follows the Chhandogyasutra and resides at Puni, we, the inhabitants went to the boundaries which the headman of the *nadu* [district] pointed out, circumambulated the village from right to left, and planted milk-bushes and placed stones around it. The boundaries of this village are – the eastern boundary is to the west of the boundary of Palaiyur, the southern boundary is to the north of the boundary of Palaiyur, the western boundary is to the east of the boundary of Manarpaklcam and of the boundary of Kollipakkam, and the northern boundary is to the south of the boundary of Velimanallur. The donee shall enjoy the wet land and the dry land included within these four boundaries, wherever the iguana runs and the tortoise crawls, and shall be permitted to dig river channels and inundation channels for conducting water from the Seyaru, the Vehka, and the tank of Tiraiyan… Those who take and use the water in these channels by pouring out baskets, by cutting branch channels, or by employing small levers shall pay a fine to be collected by the king. He (the donee) and his descendants shall enjoy the houses, house gardens, and so forth, and shall have the right to build houses and halls of burnt tiles. The land included within these boundaries we have endowed with all exemptions. He himself shall enjoy the exemptions obtaining in this village without paying for the oil-mills and looms, the hire of the well-diggers, the share of the brahmans of the king, the share of *shengodi* [a plant], the share of the *kallal* [a type of fig

tree], the share of *kannittu,* the share of corn-ears, the share of the headman, the share of the potter, the sifting of paddy, the price of *ghi,* the price of cloth, the share of cloth, the hunters, messengers, dancing-girls, the grass, the best cow and the best bull, the share of the district, cotton-threads, servants, palmyra molasses, the fines to the accountant and the minister, the tax on planting water-lilies, the share of the water-lilies, the fourth part of the trunks of old trees of various kinds, including areca palms and coconut trees… The grant was made in the presence of the local authorities, of the ministers, and of the secretaries.

Kasakkudi Plates of Nandivarman, tr. E. Hultzsch, *South Indian Inscriptions,*

II. 3, pp. 360 ff.

In this system, the function of the brahman was not restricted to the performance and the rhetoric of ritual. Beyond this the brahman grantees also had a role as settlers, colonizers and entrepreneurs, a role which is evident from the grant but is not always recognized. Up to a point the brahman settlements and the temples which developed alongside them acted as surrogates for the state, although they were required to work together with the officers of the state. They provided an administrative substructure in organizing the working of the lands and other resources gifted to them. To the extent that royal administration was concerned with integrating diverse economies into peasant economies this process was assisted by the nuclei of peasant economies that resulted from these grants. The grantees collected revenue and encouraged further extensions of agriculture, some of which would also provide revenue for the state. In addition they had responsibility for the effective management of irrigation, largely tanks, wells and channels that were maintained by the local village assemblies.

Ideologically, the underlining of Brahmanism and the role of the brahman helped to strengthen monarchy by investing the ruling dynasty with legitimacy, by conferring *kshatriya* status on the royal family in some instances and by converting existing social groups into castes, which were then slotted into a hierarchy to make them more functional. The frequency with which dynasties claimed *brahma-kshatra* descent reveals the close functioning of political power and brahmanical ideology in parts of the peninsula during this period. The emphasis on brahman and non-brahman status gradually became the foundational stratification in this area, drawing from the principles of *varna* organization to provide a framework for the juxtaposition of statuses, although it did not conform to the fourfold *varna* society. There were of course other ways of acquiring a high status. For example, the death of a hero in battle or in defending the village could be used by his kinsmen to claim status and land.

The expansion of agriculture did not terminate other activities such as pastoralism. That cattle-keeping remained important in particular areas is evident from the early *viragal,* literally hero-stones, depicting and thus memorializing the local hero defending cattle or fending off attacks by predators, both animal and human. Such depictions began as simple representations, but became elaborate by the end of the millennium. They underline the frequency of raids and suchlike, all of which had to be met through the efforts of the village. The need for the village to protect itself by its own resources emphasizes a decentralized administration. There is an impressive increase in the sheer numbers of such stones from the late first millennium AD.

Single memorial stones tend to occur in isolated areas and often depict a standing warrior or one with a horse. Where they occur in clusters it appears they were brought to the vicinity of the village, frequently in or near the temple used by the upper castes. Some memorials commemorate heroes who died in battle, but the heroic gradually became associated with all actions of defence. They occur in

larger numbers in frontier zones or peripheral areas of forested land, presumably where state policing would be weak. Hero-stones are less common in agriculturally fertile areas. In the semi-arid zones of Maharashtra and Karnataka, fending off cattle-raids was a frequent theme. These raids may have reflected the dislocation of forest-peoples by agricultural settlements. In coastal areas such as Goa, representations of sea battles suggest attacks by pirates.

The embellishment of the hero-stone led to the single panel being replaced by three or four horizontal panels, sculpted in bâs-relief. The topmost panel indicated the symbols of the hero's sect, such as an image of Karttikeya, the son of Shiva; a *lingam* and *yoni* for a Shaiva; a small image of Mahavira for a Jaina; and invariably the sun and the moon, encapsulating eternity. The next panel depicted the fulfilment of the promise to the hero – carried to paradise by *apsaras,* celestial maidens. The lowest panels were representations of the event that had caused his death. Sometimes a brief inscription was included below the panels, providing information on the person and the occasion. In subsequent periods, when the wife of the hero was required to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, and thus become a *sati,* her death was also commemorated through a memorial. The sculpture on the slab was simple and generally depicted an open right forearm, with bangles still intact, symbolizing the continuation of the marriage. It was important to cultivate a heroic ethos in the defence of settlements not protected by the royal army.

Some of the royal revenue went to maintain an army. A system of levies was used in addition to the king's standing army. The army consisted mainly of foot soldiers, cavalry and a unit of elephants. Cavalry was the most expensive, since the availability of horses was limited and to import horses from north India or west Asia was costly. The Pallavas built dockyards at Nagapattinam and developed a navy, although this was inconsiderable compared to the naval strength that south India later acquired under the Cholas. The recent discovery of a possible wharf at Mahabalipuram also points to maritime activities.

The navy assisted in the maritime trade with south-east Asia, by now constituting many kingdoms: Kambuja and Funan (Cambodia); Champa (Vietnam); and Shrivijaya (the southern Malay peninsula, Java and Sumatra). All of these were in contact with India, as well as the trade routes travelled by south Indian merchants. On the western coast, commercial maritime initiative was gradually taken over by intermediary traders, mainly the Arabs. Indian traders gradually became suppliers, rather than carriers, of goods to countries westward. However, cultural contacts with south-east Asia not only continued but increased.

Continuing trade was one of the factors encouraging urbanization. In addition to maritime trade in coastal areas, trade was tied to internal networks traversing the peninsula. The cities of the Ganges Plain seem to have been in temporary decline, but in many other areas cities and commerce are evident. In the earlier period some items arriving at Indian ports were used as part of the ongoing gift-exchange necessary to chiefdoms. The emergence of kingdoms, with revenue from agriculture and commerce, probably reduced the role of gift-exchange. Growing wealth and stratification meant that exchanges took place through trade, rather than as gifts.

Earlier, there had been a difference between the two main regions of the peninsula, the Deccan and the south: votive inscriptions from the Deccan mentioned artisans, guilds, traders and landowners, whereas Tamil *brahmi* inscriptions recorded the donations of individual professionals and merchants with fewer mentions of landowners. This changed when land became a major segment of the economy.

A number of towns were mentioned in the Deccan inscriptions. Among them were Banavasi,

Kolhapur, Vatapi, Aihole, Pattadakal and Shravana Belgola. Some, such as Puligere, were originally military camps that were gradually transmuted into administrative and commercial centres. Others were administrative centres to start with or else were the foci of local religious activity. Both categories acquired urban characteristics and were frequently the hub of exchange. Cash donations were recorded, although coins do not seem to have been minted in large amounts. Perhaps this was related to the greater expansion of agricultural interests at this time. Such an expansion would have encouraged the growth of exchange centres although the exchange may have been of local produce.

The centrality of the town can be seen in descriptions of urban life in the *Shilappadigaram* and the *Manimegalai*. Kaveripattinam, also known as Puhar or Pumpuhar, was the cynosure with its harbour and wharf, the houses of merchants and the special part of the city where the Yavanas lived. Paddy came in boats from rural areas to Puhar, where it was exchanged for other merchandise destined for inland market centres such as Kanchipuram, Uraiyur and Madurai. Commercial production at Puhar was also linked to resources from other places: beryl from Palghat; pearls from further south; timber such as sandalwood, teak and ebony from inland forests; and textiles from many centres. Puhar was a lively city with an affluent life-style.

Literary Culture

In the early part of this period, education was provided by Jainas and Buddhists whose teaching pervaded the urban ethos. Gradually, however, the brahmans superseded them. The Jainas had a tradition of religious literature in Sanskrit, such as the *Adipurana* and the *Yashatilaka.* They had also used Prakrit and now began to use Tamil. They developed a few centres for religious instruction, including advanced education, near Madurai and Kanchipuram, and at Shravana Belgola. Many Jaina monks tended to scatter, isolating themselves in small caves tucked away in the hills and forests. The most beautiful of these caves was at Sittannavasal in Pudukkot-tai, with its traces of what must once have been murals of elegant design. Monasteries were the nucleus of the Buddhist educational system and were located in the region of Kanchipuram and the valleys of the Krishna and the Godavari Rivers. Buddhist centres focused on the study of the religion, particularly as there was intense controversy between Buddhist sects and those adhering to Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Considerable time was spent in debating the finer points of theology. Royal patronage, which the Buddhists now often lacked, gave an advantageous position to the others. The popularity of Jainism was also eroded to some degree in competition with Shaivism when it received less patronage. When Mahendra-varman I, the Pallava king, lost interest in Jainism and took up the cause of Shaivism the Jainas were deprived of valuable royal patronage. Such swings in royal patronage were not common, since most rulers preferred to distribute their patronage tactfully. A change might be due to personal inclination, or to an assessment that a particular group was losing importance as a network of royal support or a provider of revenue.

Ghatikas, colleges and centres providing brahmanical learning, were generally attached to the temples. Entry to these colleges was at first open to any ‘twice-born’ caste. Although occasionally endowed by merchants, they were viewed as brahman institutions and concerned with advanced study. Extensive royal patronage allowed the potential for political activity, in that they were centres either of loyalty to the monarchy or – when supported by disaffected members of the royal family – of political opposition. Apart from the monasteries and colleges at Kanchipuram, which acquired fame

almost equalling Nalanda, there were a number of other Sanskrit colleges. In about the eighth century, the *matha,* an institution supported by Brahmanism and Puranic Hinduism, emerged as a parallel institution to the Buddhist and Jaina monasteries. This was a combination of a rest-house, a feeding-centre, and an educational centre, which indirectly brought publicity to the particular sect with which it was associated. The *mathas* naturally served a more useful purpose in places where pilgrims gathered and where religious discussions could be more effective.

Sanskrit was now the recognized medium in these institutions and spread through its use in the *agrahara, ghatikas* and *mathas*. It was also the official language at the court, which encouraged its use in literary circles. Two outstanding works from this period were Bharavi's *Kiratarjuniya,* based on a theme from the *Mahabharata* which figures the hero Arjuna's contestation with Shiva, and Dandin's *Dashakumaracharita (The Tale of the Ten Princes*). Dandin's stories were located in various parts of the subcontinent and included a motley collection of characters from virtually every walk of life, while being narrated with wit and a conspicuous lack of sanctimoniousness. But conscious literary labouring was also fashionable, presumably as a virtuoso demonstration of proficiency in the language. Sometimes a poem was written with such skill that it could be read both forwards and in reverse, each reading narrating two different stories, such as the narrative of the *Ramayana* in one reading and of the *Mahabharata* in the other. Those who indulged in and acclaimed this degree of literary artifice ignored the languages of new literature – Tamil in the south, with Kannada, and later, Telugu, in the Deccan.

References were made to the existence of literature in Kannada at this time, but not too much has survived. A seventh-century inscription of a Chalukya king at Badami mentions Kannada as the local Prakrit or natural language, and Sanskrit as the language of culture, which neatly summarizes the relationship between the two languages. This relationship was later labelled that of the *deshi* or local, popular literature, and the *marga,* or mainstream literature in Sanskrit. An awareness of the social context of languages and literatures is implicit in this distinction. A century later, a Chalukya king had an inscription engraved in Kannada at Kanchipuram. The ninth-century *Kavirajamarga* is important to Kannada poetics.

Tamil could by now claim poetry of both the lyric and epic variety. Didactic poems of an earlier time frequently deriving from Jaina inspiration were known and recited, such as those of the *Kural* and the *Naladiyar*. The two Tamil epic poems, *Shilappadigaram* and *Manimegalai,* which laid the foundation for a mature and independent poetic style in Tamil, are often dated to the mid-first millennium AD. The author of the first, Ilango Adigal, a member of the royal family, was evidently partial to the Shramanas since the poem is suffused with an ethos highlighting *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *karma* (human action), although it also shows a certain religious eclecticism. The sequel written by Cattan, who came from a merchant family, continues the story and the mood. These poems are departures from earlier stories and poems of sword-wielding heroes since the central figure of the first is the heroine Kannaki, whose heroic violence and reward take the unusual form of a curse on the city of Madurai, and her eventual ascension as the goddess Pattini. Although these poems are classified as epics, the themes are different from epic stereotypes. The didactic element is also evident in a series of Jaina *Ramayanas,* composed in diverse places, which are alternative texts to those inspired by a brahmanical ethos.

Both the long Tamil poems contain descriptions rich in imagery of the countryside as well as of the town of Kaveripattinam, and are particularly evocative of the activities of daily life. A passage from the *Shilappadigaram* reads:

In the thicket
Of fresh lotuses rising from the ponds
Caressed by splendid paddy fields
And sugarcane are heard, as on a battlefield
Where two kings fight for victory,
Various kinds of clamorous sounds
Made by waterfowls, screaming cranes,
Red-footed swans, green-footed herons,
Wild fowls, cormorants, snipes,
The *ural* water-birds, large herons
And other birds. Buffaloes enter and immerse
Themselves in the soft, unploughed mire.
With the hair on their bodies unwashed, eyes
Red, they come and rub
Their itching backs against the unspoilt, straw bins,
Thus loosening the twisted strands that hold them.
The bins come apart spilling the rich grain
Stored inside with sheaves of excellent paddy
That resembles chowries.
One heard the noise of the loud talk of labourers
With strong arms and farmers standing
In knots. One heard the sound
Of songs in new styles by low born women
Who turned on by strong wine worked in the fields.
Eyes wide like red minnows,
They bandied indecent words and looked
Singularly charming in their clothes splashed
With mud that also glazed their breasts and shoulders
Clasped by armlets. From their hair they picked
The fragrant flowers and thrust seedlings instead.
One heard the ploughmen's song of praise
As they stood by their ploughs and worshipped
With folded hands. They appeared to break open
The earth radiant with wreaths bound
With shining ears of rice, plaited
With blue lotuses and the thick, vine-like hariali grass

Ilango Adigal, *Shilappadigaram,* ti. R. Parthasarathy, *The The Lay of an Anklet,* pp. 98-9

The description of the city comes from *Manimegalai* where Puhar is compared to a woman:

The moats filled with clear water, embellished with innumerable flowers, sounding with the song of a thousand kinds of bird, form a ring round her ankle. The surrounding walls, commanded by towers, are her diamond studded girdle. The gates surmounted by staffs with flags flying, are her shoulders laden with many necklaces. The temple of the tree of abundance (*kalpataru*) and the temple of the thunderbolt (*vajra*) standing face to face, are her two superb and provocative breasts. The vast palace, thousands of years old, of matchless splendour, commanding the city, the residence of the Chola king who wears a necklace of orchid-tree leaves, is her face. The full moon rising in the east and the sun setting in the west are her earrings of silver and gold.

Cattan, *Manimekhalai,* u. A. Danielou, p. 22

Classicism in Tamil includes many expressions invoking the emotion of love, the seminal form of which can be found in earlier *Shangam* poetry. The development of Tamil was furthered by a religious movement popularized by groups of poets, hymnologists and preachers, who in modern studies are often called the 'saints' of the Tamil devotional sects. Tamil was widely used in these compositions, accelerating its evolution compared to other southern languages. (The term 'saint' has been used extensively for those who were teachers and poets of *bhakti,* where devotion was the primary religious expression. The word should not be understood in the sense of a Christian saint, but rather as a charismatic person girted to teach the new doctrines and to compose poems, and around whom large groups of followers gathered.)

Philosophical and Religious Changes

The interaction of northern culture with that of the south, with the circuits of traders and regular routes of armies as well as brahman settlers, resulted in the assimilation of some of the patterns, ideas and institutions of the north, while others were rejected or modified. Some acted as catalysts and new forms were created. The brahmans settled in Tamilaham saw themselves as keepers of what they now regarded as sacrosanct Vedic tradition. The degree to which it was viewed as a contribution of the north is debatable, since sections of the *Vedas* had been composed or redacted at centres for Vedic study in the peninsula. More likely, the earlier process of Sanskrit becoming the hegemonic language through adoption and adaption was continued. However, in the peninsula its hegemony was not absolute, since the languages derived from Dravidian roots retained authority and were more widely used. Educated brahmans were becoming mobile and seeking new patrons since the *mlechchha* rulers of the north – the Shakas, Indo-Greeks, Kushanas and the Hunas – had been more supportive of Buddhism and Jainism, and of emergent Puranic religions. But the rulers of western India, the Kshatrapas, had been the first to use Sanskrit in their inscriptions, and others were patrons of brahmans.

As keepers of the Vedic tradition, they were venerated and gradually found supporters in the kings of the peninsula who, like rulers anywhere, sought respectability by conforming to conservative tradition – in this case, the tradition as interpreted by the brahmans. The performance of rituals by the kings was an avenue to high status. The brahmans' claim to be in communication with the gods, their supposed ability to manipulate unseen powers, and their conviction that they knew the correct *mantra* or formula to establish the well-being of the king, was probably more convincing to the kings than other claims. The belief that rituals bestow authority and power was widespread and an additional incentive was the promise of heavenly rewards. Frequently the rituals were from the *Agamas,* although Vedic practices continued. These would be the occasions that allowed some merging of both traditions.

The Vedic tradition was not confined to rituals. Commentaries on the Vedic corpus had encouraged the existing discussion of philosophical ideas. The evolution of philosophical schools was now recognized in many parts of the subcontinent. Some philosophers were anxious to revitalize Vedic thought and this would have been an accompaniment to establishing *mathas* and *ghatikas.* But revitalization involves making changes. One way of making philosophy based on the Vedic corpus more acceptable was by reducing its obscurities, thereby making it comprehensible to the educated. This was attempted by Shankaracharya, who accepted the challenge to Brahmanism from the

Buddhists and the Jainas and the popular devotional sects, and attempted to meet it.

Coming from Kerala, he wrote and taught probably in the eighth-ninth century, although his dates remain controversial and could be of a later period. He achieved fame for his study of the Vedic system and as the new interpreter of Vedanta philosophy. He also rekindled a greater interest in the *Upanishads* through his commentaries elaborating on the relation between the *atman,* the individual soul, and the *brahman,* the universal soul, realized through *jnana,* appropriate knowledge.

Shankara argued in favour of a Monist position where reality is seen as *advaita,* non-dual; and that the world we see around us is *maya,* illusion, for the reality lies beyond and cannot be perceived through existing human senses. Asceticism alone enables one to control these senses and direct them in a manner that permits a glimpse of the ultimate reality. He was opposed to unnecessary and meaningless ritual and established his own *mathas,* where a simplified worship was practised and a systematized Vedanta was taught. These were visualized as parallel to monasteries and are said to have been located at Badrinath in the Himalayas, Puri in Orissa, Dvarka on the western coast, and the most important at Shringeri in the south. All these places collected large numbers of pilgrims and have been viewed as located at the four corners of the subcontinent. However, there is some chronological discrepancy since inscriptions relating to the Shankaracharya *mathas* are later. This has led to considerable debate over the chronology of the *mathas*. These institutions were richly endowed and soon had branches elsewhere, which became centres of Shankara's teaching. A hierarchy of control emerged in these institutions, taking the form of an ecclesiastical organization, but it did not become a parallel to the state, however influential it might have been in matters of administration.

Shankaracharya is said to have visited many centres of learning and debated with leading scholars, such as Madanamishra, Kumarila Bhatta and Prabhakara, as well as various Buddhist and Jaina scholars. He encouraged members of his ascetic order to propagate his teaching as pan of a missionary enterprise. The philosophical forms and the institutional organization adopted by Shankara often paralleled or imitated those of the Buddhists. The latter were understandably indignant at a movement intended to undermine them by using their own methods. This is reflected, for instance, in the disparaging description of Shankara in a sixteenth-century Tibetan history of Buddhism by the Lama Taranatha. That Shankara saw Buddhism as a threat points to the continuing importance of Buddhist thought. The critique of some of Shankara's writing from non-Buddhist sources goes back to the comments of Ramanuja in the twelfth century.

Debates and discussions among scholars were common practice, and their public role derived from the earlier Shramanic tradition. It was also an age of commentaries and exegeses on what was regarded as established tradition, which was now being re-interpreted among new social groups. The commentaries and the glosses often carried new ideas. Where they were departures from earlier thinking they have a historical significance. The sources of law, for example, were changing and more emphasis was given to customary law of the family, the guild and the *jati*.

Shankara's enthusiasm in debating with his opponents and their reasoned responses contributed to a tradition that spurred philosophical centres into new speculative thinking, even if this sometimes encouraged conservative thought. Shankara's philosophy contained within it the possibilities of negative reactions as well. Among these was the argument that if the world around us is an illusion there is little incentive to understand how it functions or to derive empirical knowledge from it.

Vedic philosophy and practice was not the only culture that marked a presence in the south. Other groups, either anti-Vedic or non-Vedic in teaching, had also evolved and now had a presence. Apart

from Jainism and Buddhism, there were Bhagavata and Pashupata sects, preaching devotion to Vishnu and Shiva respectively. Their rituals were described in the *Agamas* of each sect. The emphasis was on personal worship. The offerings as part of the ritual of *puja* were generally flowers, fruit and grain rather than the sacrifice of animals. The rituals drew on the believed efficacy of *mantras,* involving the worship of icons located in temples and the liturgies connected with this worship. This was a more comprehensible form of worship than the complicated Vedic and other rituals performed by kings under the guidance of their priests, and was to strike root in the populace.

Although orthodox brahmans initially dismissed the devotional movement, the latter eventually proved more popular than other religious trends in the south, and this was recognized even by royal patrons. The Tamil devotional movement was deeply affected by Vaishnavism and Shaivism in the choice of deity. Some sects were hostile to Buddhism and Jainism, but were nevertheless influenced by these religions. These sects were among the early expressions of what has been called the Bhakti movement.

This all-embracing label is used for various sectarian movements of the subcontinent at different times. Many of these had similarities, although they were by no means identical. There were many strands in the Bhakti tradition that need to be seen as distinct. As a broad-based tradition it registered forcefully a key characteristic of religion in India: that formalism was required of a small status-determined group, but for the majority religion remained an area of interplay, accommodation, contestation of a localized kind, and experimentation in seeking the emotional and psychological responses associated with religious belief and practice. The sectarian identity was the more recognizable identity. The essentials of religion lay in the articulation of these latter groups – in their compositions, their forms of worship and their places of worship. This tends to be overlooked by those who see religion unfold solely through a series of texts.

It could be argued that Vaishnavism and Shaivism were but a religious form given to movements that would have surfaced in any case. In this sense, they were an expression of local sentiment questioning the attempts at homogenization made by Vedic Brahmanism, with its insistence on orthodox practices and social inequality. Buddhists and Jainas were less popular in the devotional movement because they were said to mortify their bodies through ascetic practices as a form of worship. But this was not the sole reason for some of the more prominent teachers having converted from Jainism, and relations between Jainism and the Tamil devotional movement have not been adequately investigated. The appearance of this movement was not unexpected since it had a long gestation period, particularly if its origins are sought in the *Shangam* poems of love from which the poetry of love and devotion is said to have evolved. The deity as lover could sometimes inspire the most powerful poetry on the interface of the sacred and the erotic.

The devotional poetry focuses on the individual's search for liberation from rebirth, on devotion as a path to liberation, and on a preference for avoiding violence. Love was directed to a deity. The devotional aspect was formulated in a relationship between man or woman and their deity of choice, a relationship based on love, and on the grace which the deity bestowed on the worshipper. This formulation had not been so strongly emphasized in earlier religious thought. The worshipper, recognizing a feeling of inadequacy, would declare his love for his deity who was believed to permit a reciprocal relationship. This is described poignantly in one of the earliest Tamil poems of this tradition, dedicated to Murugan.

> When you see his face praise him with joy,
> worship him with joined palms, bow before him,
> so that his feet touch your head.

Holy and mighty will be his form
rising to heaven, but his sterner face
will be hidden, and he will show you
the form of a young man, fragrant and beautiful
and his words will be loving and gracious –
Don't be afraid – I knew you were coming.

Pattupattu, 'Tirumuruganarrupadai', 285-90, in A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India,* p. 330

Tamil devotionalism achieved a great wave of popularity in the hymns and poems of the Alvars and the Nayanars, the Vaishnava and Shaiva poets. The hymns dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu have been preserved in two separate collections, the *Tirumurai* and the *Nalayiradivya-prabandham.* Of the Shaiva poets the most popular were Appar – who is said to have converted King Mahendra-varman – Sambandar, Manikkavasagar and Sundaramurti, some of whom were apostate Jainas. The better-known Vaishnava Alvars were Nammalvar, Tirumankai Alvar and the much revered woman poet, Andal. Vedic gods were either denied or ignored, the emphasis being not on the object of worship but on the relationship involved in worship. Manikkavasagar explains it in his hymns:

Indra or Vishnu or Brahma
Their divine bliss crave not I
I seek the love of thy saints
Though my house perish thereby.
To the worst hell will I go
So but thy grace be with me
Best of all, how could my heart
Think of a God beside Thee?…
I had no virtue, penance, knowledge, self-control
A doll to turn
At other's will I danced, whistled, fell.
But me He filled in every limb
With love's mad longing, and that I might climb
There whence there is no return.
He shewed His beauty, made me His.
Ah me, when shall I go to Him…?

P. Kingsbury and G. E. Phillips, *Hymns of the Tamil Saivite Saints,* pp. 89, 127

Nammalvar's poems to Vishnu evoke an even stronger commitment to the deity, with no concession to formal religion:

You believers in Linga mythologies
And you Jainas
you Buddhists
becoming all of you choppers of logic
becoming even your gods
he stands there
our lord:
Come see him in Kurukur
where rich ears of paddy
fan him like ceremonial yak tails.
In this place without lies
Come praise him.

Elsewhere he says:

I just said
'The grove and hill of my lord'
and he came down
and filled my heart…
My lord
who swept me away forever
into joy that day
made me over into himself
and sang in Tamil
his own songs through me:
what shall I say
to the first of things
flame
standing there,
what shall I say
to stop.

What her mother said:

O women
you too have daughters
and have brought them up.
How can I tell you
about my poor girl?
She talks of the conch shell, *
she talks of the wheel,*
and she talks night and day
of the basil in his hair.
what shall I do?

A. K. Ramanujam, *Hymns for the Drowning,* pp. 57, 78 ff., 35

Appar says:

Once he made me run about
with the naked Jainas
then made me sing sweet songs
for his golden feet.
Kurankatuturai's Lord
saved me from *karma*
and joined me with his true devotees.

Indira V. Peterson, *Poems to Shiva,* p. 289

Although there were some brahmans among the singers of poems, many of the participants were of the lower castes, being artisans and cultivators. Not all were composers but they were nevertheless familiar with the compositions. They came from various parts of the Tamil country and travelled a great deal. Among the more radical features of these groups were the active participation of women poets and the presence of the *pulaiyar* or outcastes.

The poems of Andal, one of the best-known women poets, were frequently sung. She saw herself as

the beloved of the god Vishnu and her verses encapsulated her love for the deity. These foreshadow the verses of Mirabai, who was to become equally famous as a Bhakti poet many centuries later in north India, celebrating her love for the Krishna incarnation of Vishnu. The evocations of Karaikkalamnaiyar were closer to asceticism. Women participants in the Tamil devotional movement renounced their social obligations, but did not join an alternative order or become nuns. They created alternative possibilities within society by their poetry, their activities and their sublimation of eroticism. Up to a point this was a challenge to patriarchy, but the challenge had to take the form of devotion to a deity. Nammalvar, in one of his poems, imagines himself as a woman in relationship with the deity who is a male. But the passionate love of a male poet for a goddess was not encouraged. Although goddesses were widely worshipped, they were rarely the focus of devotion in these poems.

The question still remains why the religion of the Alvars and Nayanars became so popular from the latter part of the first millennium AD. It may have been a reaction to the formalistic Sanskritic culture and religious practice introduced into elite circles, and a reluctance to be subordinated to this culture. The role of the Bhakti tradition in relation to Vedic Brahmanism was in many ways similar to that of the earlier Shramanic sects. The rituals and the claims of the brahmans to being close to the gods were unacceptable, as was the social exclusion of lower castes. But Tamil devotionalism was also ambivalent towards the Shramanic tradition and was hostile to the Shramanas. From the Vaishnava and Shaiva perspectives, Shramanic beliefs were heresy. The Generality of the deity, visualized in iconic form and housed in a temple, had become important facets of Puranic Hinduism with which the devotional movement had obvious links.

It has been suggested that the movement was parallel to changes in the polity. The king is seen as the focus of loyalty and demands devotion from the intermediaries and his subjects, while the deity receives similar sentiments from worshippers. This implicit overlap might have encouraged rulers to patronize the devotional sects, underlining the notion of loyalty. This was a more direct message than in religions that had no place for temples and the divinity of kings. But the equation of the state with the temple, and the king with the deity, was more complex. Although changes in polity of the kind that occurred in Tamil-nadu also occurred in other parts of the subcontinent at this time, the manifestation of what might be called Bhakti is a later phenomenon in other areas. A wide social range inspired the devotional movement, but the individual liberation suggested in these teachings may have resonated with historical changes. In Tamil-nadu it may also have related to the upward mobility of some groups of peasants and artisans, and with the freedom provided by cities to ideas and actions.

According to some traditions, Tamil society eventually rejected Buddhism and also reduced its patronage of Jainism. An incident frequently described is that of many Jaina monks, who agreed to a debate after attacking a Shaiva monastery, and, when they lost, further agreed to be impaled. The figure of those impaled is sometimes quoted as eight thousand. This sounds an unlikely story, particularly during a period when rulers were said to be converting from Jainism to Shaivism. In such traditions, the hostility is generally between the Shaivas and the Shramanic sects, as was the case in other parts of India. Gradually, the Jaina lay community in the peninsula was limited to Karnataka with small pockets elsewhere in the south. But the imprint of Buddhism and Jainism was evident in the Tamil devotional sects. They leaned towards rejecting the established order of society as stratified in the caste structure, but the rejection was on the ethical plane and not a prelude to a radical change of society.

The deity could be a folk-deity in origin promoted to a manifestation of a mainstream deity. The concept of a compassionate deity reflected Buddhist ideas, more specifically the notion of the

compassionate *bodhisattva,* though the Christians of the south may also have made a contribution. The feeling of human inadequacy that became an important facet of the Bhakti devotional sects would have owed more to Buddhist ancestry than to Vedic. The decline of the heterodox sects coincided with the rise of the Bhakti sects, probably depriving them of much of their potential following.

At one level the Tamil devotional sects resisted Sanskritic culture. The brahmans enjoyed royal patronage, but the sects were widely supported by common people, although royal patronage was extended to the sects in later centuries when they had a substantial following, partly for reasons of political expediency apart from religious conviction. A constant awareness of the strength of popular movements was a necessary counterpart to royal power. Association with a popular movement brought a network of loyalty which, if the movement was widespread, could be territorially extensive. The Tamil devotional movement had roots in the area and was to that extent useful to political authority. Whereas Vedic Brahmanism propagated the use of Sanskrit through elaborate rituals, the devotional sects expressed themselves in easily understood forms using the commonly spoken language. The brahmans were obsessed with caste regulations, the Tamil poets excluded no one for reasons of caste alone and, on the contrary, welcomed lower castes.

Under the aegis of the brahmans, organized religion was well fortified with finance and patronage, both of which came from either royal families or wealthy landowners and merchants. The local temple, seen as the abode of the deity, was one location of religious activity. Some sought to integrate the two levels of religion – the brahmanical and the devotional movement – through rituals and functions, if only to a limited extent. The temple became a location for this attempt at integration. Temples had various categories of officiants. The most influential were the *smarta* brahmans proficient in Vedic and other Sanskrit learning. A large number of brahmans were locally recruited priests, with a smattering of Vedic and Puranic knowledge, who performed many of the routine rituals. Where the temple had emerged from a local cult centre the priests introduced the local mythology and ritual into the worship of deities. This was then given a stamp of authenticity by inclusion in the sectarian *Agama* texts, which provided the temple with a presumed history via the *sthala-puranas* and the *mahatmyas,* when these came to be written. The Tamil devotional poets addressed a specific deity and its icon. When their following grew, their compositions became part of devotional worship. Some tension between the different groups could have resulted from this divergence. At one level devotionalism focused on the local cult, forms of worship and language. At another level, by the worship of deities known to other areas of the subcontinent, it also acted as a way of partially homogenizing Puranic Hinduism.

The Role of the Temple

Temples were maintained from endowments that consisted either of villages and agricultural lands, or else came from the investment of capital. The donors could be members of the royal family, wealthy intermediaries or merchants or guilds. The smaller accessories of the temple, such as subsidiary images, lamps, oil, etc., were generally obtained through the individual donations of lesser members of the community. Temple attendants were of various categories. Brahmans alone could conduct the rituals in the *garbha-griha,* the holy of holies, whereas members of the other castes (generally the lower castes) played music for the ceremonies in the temple, lighted the lamps and attended to the flowers and garlands necessary for the worship of the images, as well as to the cleanliness of the

temple. But castes of potters and tanners and the outcastes, regarded as ritually unclean castes, were not permitted to enter the temple since their presence was held to be polluting. A sizeable increase in the endowments and attendants of the temple usually led to the appointment of a formal managing committee to supervise their administration. Members of this committee included brahmans, *velalas* or landowners graded as ritually clean *shudras,* and some officers.

The Tamil poets popularized their hymns and music, which were slowly incorporated into temple ritual. In later times this inspired some deeply moving music. The *vina,* the lute, was probably the most frequently used instrument. Initially an instrument with a pear-shaped body, it later took the form in which it is found today – a long fingerboard with gourds at either end. Dancing and music were included in the temple ritual as forms of service to the deity. From the Pallava period onwards the more prosperous temples maintained trained dancers, singers and musicians. Originating in folk-dancing, the choreography of temple-dancing became the sophisticated and stylized renderings of religious themes apparent in its later forms. This gave rise to the system of employing *devadasis* – the women who served the deity – in many large temples, virtually all over India. The training, was arduous and based on complex techniques and forms of dance, singing and music. Some among them became composers of devotional poems. In origin, the rituals they performed were related to the idea of the special power embedded in women, aspects of which were expressed in ritual and dance. But this was sometimes deflected to entertaining the more affluent temple functionaries and worshippers. Inevitably, where it degenerated it required the women to include activities that had little to do with homage to the deity.

The vogue established by the Buddhists for excavating cave temples continued. Patrons of brahmans and Buddhists vied with each other in having shrines and temples excavated in the Deccan hills and further south. The most impressive of these caves were at Ajanta and Ellora. At the latter site, the excavation of temples to Shiva and Vishnu, and of rock-cut Jaina temples, revealed that the earlier style of cutting cave shrines started by the Buddhists had continued.

Murals at some Buddhist cave shrines had illustrated Buddhist narratives. Such paintings depicted familiar themes from the narratives of Buddhist texts, but at the same time drew on a rich cross-section of contemporary life. To cover the walls of deep-cut caves with murals, or to sculpt into rock, was an achievement of no mean order, considering the difficulty of adequate lighting and working conditions in these vast caves. The technique of painting required the preparation of the ground before it could be painted. A paste consisting of powdered rock, clay or cow dung mixed with chaff and molasses was smeared on the wall as a base. This was carefully smoothed out and while still wet was overlaid with a coat of fine lime wash. Colour was applied when the base had dried, and the finished form was burnished.The colours were made from minerals and plants, and a few still retain some of their original brilliance.

Murals were common not only in cave temples, but in the free-standing temples of the south as well. In the case of the former some of the murals may have been painted by the monks, although the professional excellence of those visible today almost certainly suggests the work of artists. Murals were not restricted to religious monuments alone, since, judging by literary descriptions, domestic architecture was also embellished with paintings, but unfortunately these have not survived.

In a rock-cut temple, sculpture cannot be added on, therefore every detail of positioning had to be planned in advance. The cutting of the rock required extremely careful control as a wrong move could ruin a sculpture or the architectural form. Rock-cut temples were introduced in the Pallava period, and these were akin to the Buddhist cave shrines, but much smaller and showing evidence of the preliminary stages of an artistic technique. The monolithic temples at Mahabalipuram, carved out of

granite boulders, still carry the barrel-vault roofs and archways generally associated with the Buddhist cave shrines of the Deccan, as well as contemporary architectural styles. They range in style from what looks like a village hut to an elaborate house, and represent a transition from domestic architecture to more complex temple styles.

The rock-cut temples on the island of Elephanta near Bombay can claim an impressive style. But the most spectacular example is the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora, which is a transition from the rock-cut to the free-standing style on a massive scale. It was built, or rather hewn, under the patronage of a Rashtrakuta king in the eighth century. When finished, it was a free-standing temple open to the sky, wholly cut from the rock of the hillside. The plan of a free-standing temple was rigorously adhered to. The Kailasanatha temple at Ellora covered approximately the same area as the Parthenon at Athens, and was one-and-a-half times higher than the Greek structure. The number of stone-cutters and workmen employed and the expenses involved in cutting the temple must have been immense, perhaps the equivalent in cost to a major military campaign. It has been suggested that it was cheaper to cut the temple from the rock than to build a free-standing structure of the same dimensions. This supposition may partly account for the prolonged popularity of the rock-cut shrine and temple. Stone structural temples were built at Aihole in the late sixth century, at Mahabalipuram – the famous Shore temple – in the seventh century, and at Kanchipuram. But, as a form, examples of the rock-cut temple continued to the Chola period.

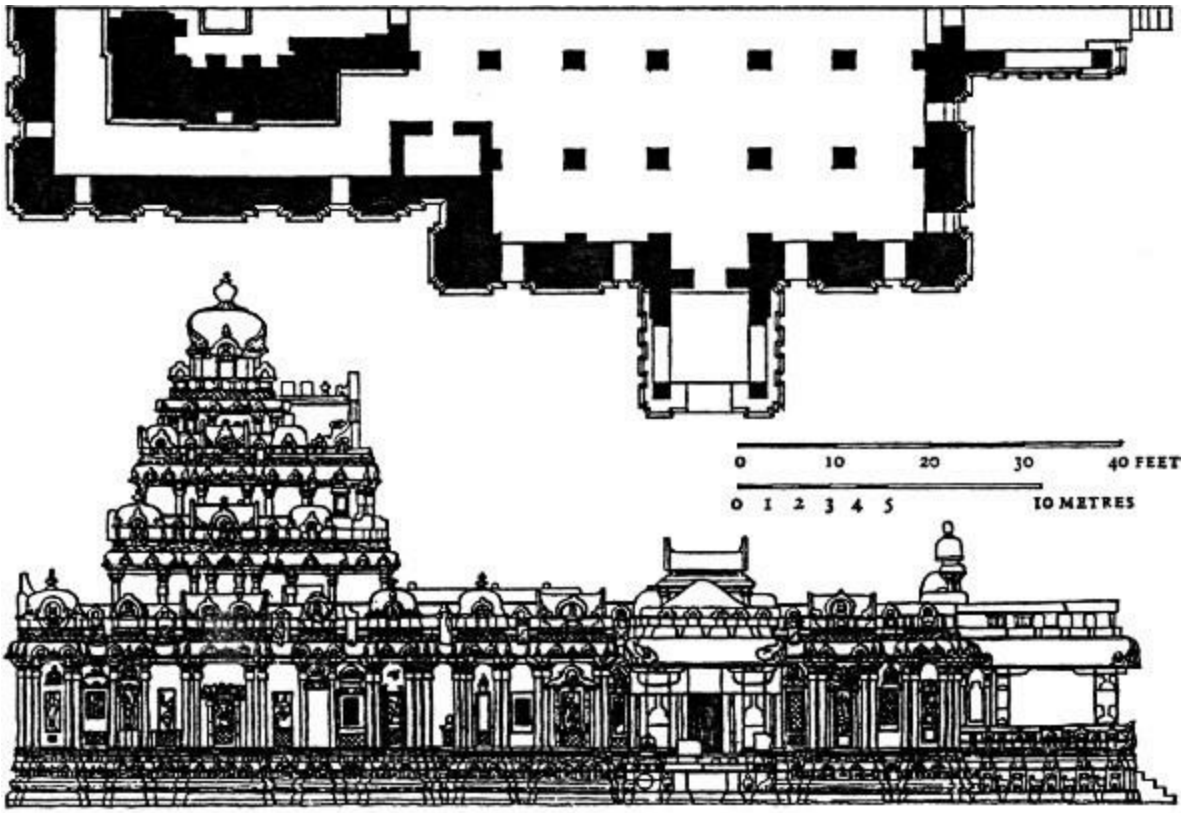
In Karnataka the temples at Aihole, Pattadakal and Badarni range from the relatively simple to the more complex, and are examples of the developed Deccan style. The Chalukya temples evolved from the Gupta shrines, but in their period of maturity they had links with both the northern and southern styles of architecture – the Nagara and the Dravida. The Durga temple at Aihole is stylistically a continuation of the Buddhist *chaitya* plan, since it is an apsidal temple, but it does not have the barrel roof usual to apsidal temples. Aihole itself emerges as a temple town, possibly because it was regarded as an ancient sacred site. There were megalithic structures in the vicinity, as well as earlier Buddhist activity at the site. It was also an important trading centre, which bestowed its name on one of the foremost guilds of the peninsula.

The rapidity with which architectural styles changed is evident if one compares the plan and elevation of the Ladh Khan temple with the Virupaksha temple. Locations such as Aihole have temples of the post-Gupta style with elements of the Dravida style, and the meeting of styles is only too evident. Changing styles not only reflected contacts between the Deccan, south India and the Ganges Plain, but also reflected the evolution of political forms within a region. These moved from small to larger kingdoms, from reasonable to substantial revenue, with the conviction that the expense of building a temple complex was an act of enviable patronage likely to bring much merit. Temples now became more than places of worship, for they were recognized as statements of power and authority: as well they might, considering the enormous expense of building a temple. What is striking is that those commissioning and financing the temples were not only members of the royal family or ministers, but also well-placed merchants.

The free-standing temples at Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal in the Deccan, and at Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram in the Tamil country, provided spaces for sculpture. The Deccan style in sculpture showed a close affinity to the Gupta. Pallava sculpture owed more to the Buddhist tradition especially of the Amaravati school, and on the whole remained both more monumental and linear in form, avoiding the tendency to ornamentation which occurred quite early in Deccan sculpture. Yet the sculpture and architecture of the Deccan and Tamil-nadu were not mere offshoots of the northern tradition. They were distinctly recognizable as different, with a character of their own: the basic form

was taken from the older tradition, but the end result unmistakably reflected its local inspiration.

The Pallava royal temples carried assertions of royal authority in various ways. These could take the form of lengthy inscriptions narrating the history of the king, or could be sculptured panels such as the ones depicting the king's biography, especially his consecration, in the Vaikuntha Perumal temples. These statements captured the counterpoint of the power of ritual and of political power, but did not indicate a separation of ritual and political sovereignty.



6. Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal: half-plan and section

Other themes drew on the mythology of the deities and legends familiar from the *Puranas,* the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana.* To some extent, they compare with the bâs-relief medallions and friezes at earlier Buddhist sites, carrying visual narrations of the life of the Buddha and of *Jataka* stories. Where the mythology was taken from a folk-cult and incorporated into the specific myth of a deity, its representation, even in a faintly recognizable form, on the walls of a royal temple would be an indication of its having been assimilated into the Puranic tradition. Depicting narratives from the epics on temple walls would have familiarized visitors with the mythology, which would then be recited by the professional reciters and story-tellers, the *pauranikas* and the *kathakaras.* The most impressive sculptures at Mahabalipuram were the large friezes, particularly one in deep relief showing a collection of numerous creatures in a scene variously ascribed either to the descent of the Ganges or to narratives from the epics. Apart from the placement of animals and their relative sizes, some of the scenes were imbued with a quiet sense of humour, such as the cat in the pose of an ascetic with an eye on the mice near by. Not only did the frieze illustrate myths, but there was also an attempt to contemporize the figures from mythology.

The nuclei of regional articulation were taking shape gradually, despite the overlay of a Sanskritic culture strongly supported by the elite. This became a recurring pattern in the evolution of regional cultures. Patterns of change, although not identical, were beginning to suggest some similarities, such as the grants of land, the diffusion of ideas, or popular teaching. Religious diversities were being expressed in variant ways. At one level there were debates among brahmans, and between brahmans and Shramans, frequently of a philosophical kind. At another level the Bhakti teachings were

challenging Vedic Brahmanism, and focusing on a religious activity where the relationship of worshipper and deity could be kept discrete, but which evolved into icons, temples, sacred places and pilgrimages. Such changes were closely related to the more tangible changes of the time and were given expression in the re-ordering of social groups. This created a vibrant cultural activity.