UNIT 7   Early Medieval Polities In Peninsular India 8TH TO 12TH Centuries A.D.

Structure

7.1   INTRODUCTION

The "early medieval" in Indian history is characterised, among other things, by the emergence of a number of regional kingdoms in different parts of the subcontinent. A few arose in South India as well. The historical processes and background of these South Indian kingdoms were, however, different from those of their counterparts elsewhere. Thus, the political processes and structures in these kingdoms offer an interesting case study in both conformity and contrast within a general sub continental pattern in early medieval India. In this lesson, we shall take up the situation in the Southern regions of peninsular India, namely in the kingdoms of the Pandyas of Madurai, Cheras of Mahodayapuram and Cholas of Thanjavur. It should not be assumed that these three kingdoms shared a uniform structure; indeed, there were variations despite apparent similarity.

7.2   HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The background from which these South Indian kingdoms emerged was somewhat the same. The Southern most region, where people speak Malayalam and Tamil today, constituted more or less a single socio-cultural unit known as "Tamilakam" in the early historical period (c. 3rd century BC to AD 3rd century) called, rather inappropriately, the "Sangam Age". An economy and society of uneven development characterised the period. Social stratification had not quite reached a stage that would demand the institution of state. Polity in this period was characterised by what have been described as chiefdom-level organisations, where many chiefdoms, big and small, exercised power and authority. There was no regular exaction of surplus in any form of revenue; nor do we come across anything which would approximate to "officers" or "offices". There is nothing that compels us to imagine the existence of an "army" of any description, references to fights and fighters notwithstanding. Notions of territory, sovereignty and state did not yet exist in that world. It was a world of heroes, heroism and heroic poetry. The oral poetry of

bards and minstrels, singing in praise of the valour and munificence of one chieftain or the other, together with the esoteric sacrifices performed by a *Brahmana* priest for the chief, provided legitimacy to the patrons.

A transformation of this society came about gradually in the period after third century A.D. There were many factors behind it. They included the expansion of plough agriculture in the river valleys, the emergence of a class of non cultivating intermediaries demanding extra-kin labour in the processes of production, the increased presence of the *Brahmana* groups with their own ideas and institutions, and a whole lot of related developments. In fact, there is a veritable "transition debate" that has grown in relation to this process. In any case, what we see when the curtain rises on the historical scene in the South by the seventh century A.D. is the existence of what could now be described as monarchical states in the Pallava (Northern Tamilnadu) and Pandya (Southern Tamilnadu) territories. Monarchical state appeared in the Kaveri valley under the Cholas and in the West Coast under the Cheras a little later. In this lesson, we shall examine the political structure in these kingdoms.

7.3   THE ROYAL ESTABLISHMENT

The most visible political organisation in the epigraphical records of this period is the state presided over by a hereditary monarch. In the case of the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas, the descent was patrilineal while there is reason to believe that it was matrilineal in the Chera kingdom. The king arrogated, or was accorded, the *Kshatriya* status or caste, with claims to belong to the *Suryavamsa* or *Chandravamsa* being put forward by the dynasts, the only exception being the Pallavas who claimed a *Brahmaksatra* status. The model of the *Chakravartin*, which was tested and found successful in the Gupta state and immediately thereafter in Northern India, was emulated in the polities in South India as well. Elaborate *prasastis* ("panegyrics"), detailing the origin, genealogy, historical antecedents and personal achievements of the ruler, were composed in his honour in all but the case of the Cheras where the nature of state was different from the rest. The literature of the period, both Tamil and Sanskrit, projects a glorious self-image of royalty and a somewhat resplendent royal court, both a means of claiming legitimacy for the ruler. In fact, new techniques of legitimation were necessary for the new political dispensations. A detailed examination of the political structure will show how it was different from the earlier periods.

Although the self-image of the king was perhaps larger than life, he had nonetheless a presence in the kingdom. Most conspicuous was the fact that the inscriptions, seen in their hundreds and thousands throughout the territory of these kingdoms, are dated in the regnal year of the kings. This was so even when the document had no claim of being a royal order or an administrative document. The royal presence was felt through the establishments of the king's government as well, both at the capital and in the different parts of the kingdom. These establishments included the "civil" and at times "military" aspects of the administration. An illustration is available in the case of the Chola state. Historians in the past such as K. A. Nilakanta Sastri waxed eloquent about the highly bureaucratic and centralised nature of the Chola empire; those of a later generation, such as Burton Stein, rejected this romantic idea altogether. Neither position is supported by the sources.

In the case of the lesser states like those of the Pandyas and Cheras or even the Cholas in the earlier periods, the presence of this government was felt in a feeble

way. For instance, inscriptions of the Pandyas speak of their civil and military functionaries in distant Southern Travancore. The Chera king himself is stated to have presided over an apparently inconsequential meeting of a small Brahmana assembly in Valappalli far away from his capital. Functionaries of the Chola state we present somewhat authoritatively in meetings of village assemblies of distant places like Uttaramerur. All this shows that the king and his establishment were not just matters of interpretation by historians in the nationalist era.

7.4 LANDED MAGNATES AS STATE'S AGENTS

By the time the Chola state was established in a most concrete manner (AD tenth century), the establishment of the king's government with a large number of functionaries or agents also grew. One interesting feature is that most or all of these functionaries were identified and enlisted from among the notables in society. One major source was the class of landed magnates, who had gained in strength in the period from the tenth century and after. By the middle of the tenth century, the landed magnates emerged in the Kaveri delta and outside in a big way. They bear high-sounding titles like *Udaiyan, Velan, Araiyan, Muventavelan,* etc. These titles indicated primarily ownership of land and also some position in the structure of the state. These titles are more often than not prefixed by the name or title of a Chola king, e.g., Ràjaràja-pallavaraiyan or Ksatriyasikhamani-muventavelan. At least in one case, there is the clear statement that the titles were actually conferred by the state (*Pattam Kattina Peyar*).

All this shows that, when a strong section of landowners emerged following the agrarian expansion in the Kaveri delta, the state was all too ready to recognise them. What is interesting is that, these magnates, so recognised, carry out the functions of the state. Recent studies have shown that most of those who functioned as the agents, or what an earlier fashion of historiography referred to as the "officers", of the state were drawn from among this class of landed magnates. Thus, there are *Adhikàris, Olainayakams, Dandanayakams, Srikaryans*, and a whole lot of similar functionaries of the king's government. It is not without significance that those who performed functions of greater consequence held more impressive titles indicating greater importance in society. These functionaries are described in so many words as carrying out the king's work: as the king himself puts it, they looked after "our work" (*Nam Karumam Aràyum*). They were "our men" (*Nantamar*) for the king and "the king's men" (*Koyirramar*) for others. Among them they carried out the administration of the kingdom, both in the capital city and in places far afield. In fact, there is considerable evidence of the transfer of such agents of the state from one place to another, a clear indication of the existence of something resembling an officialdom. It is also interesting that this pattern of landed magnates being recognised and enlisted as state agents becomes popular in the period of Uttama Chola (last quarter of 10th century) onwards and gets elaborated by the time we come to regnal periods of Ràjaràja I (685-1014 A.D.) and Rajendra I. (1014-1044 A.D.). It begins to taper off by the time of Kulottunga II (mid 12th century AD).

7.5 REVENUE

The most clearly identifiable areas where the king's "administration" had scope all over the territory were those of revenue, affairs of temples and military and police. In fact, it is in revenue administration that we see the state in its fullest. We see clear

signs of extraction of surplus in the kingdoms of the Pandyas and Cheras, although the question whether what was extracted was a tax or a rent is very difficult to answer. Annual land revenue of *Attaikkol* is mentioned in the inscriptions of the Cheras, which was collected from far and near and which went to the king himself. Similarly, there are many revenue terms in the Pandyan inscriptions. But, as in the case of other aspects of administration, it is in the case of the Cholas that we have the clearest information of the revenue system. This is not only because of the elaborate details available in the more numerous and detailed inscriptions of the Cholas; it is also a due to the fact that it was under the Cholas that the state in South India reached its highest level of development.

What is called a whole 'department of revenue' is seen in the *Puravuvarit-tinaik-kalam*. References to this 'department' begin to occur from the reign of Uttama Chola in the second half of the tenth century. It grew into an elaborate affair with various sections each under a hierarchy of officers in the time of Ràjaràja I. Even here, the more important functionaries are the wealthier landed magnates. What begins as a relatively humble affair with a few 'officers' gets elaborated with a hierarchy of them in as many as ten rungs in the period of Ràjaràja II. However, this department becomes rather insignificant by the end of the 12th century A.D., which is exactly in the same pattern of the rise, performance and gradual disappearance of the "king's men" carrying out functions of the state. It must, however, be noted that this 'department' has no presence in the countryside, its activity being limited only to the royal establishment at the capital. It is, therefore, more appropriate to describe it as a 'revenue board' or a 'revenue secretariat' rather than a 'department of revenue'.

As in the establishment called *Pravuvarit-tinaik-kalam*, so also in the realisation of revenue, we see the same pattern. This throws immense light on the nature of the polities obtaining in the kingdoms under review. In the earlier, less developed, polities of the Pandyas and Cheras, we do see different types of taxes, collected by and on behalf of the state. Most terms indicating revenue are available to us from the list of remissions and relief, given at the time of granting land and other privileges to different beneficiaries. Thus, it is argued that they indicated more a possibility than the actuality. In any case, recent studies making use of a statistical analysis of the revenue terms have brought out certain interesting details. For one thing, although there are several hundreds of terms indicating "revenue" in the inscriptions of the period, only a few had prevalence in the different parts of the territory, the others occurring only once or twice. A closer examination shows that the most important among them was land revenue, called *Katamai*, literally meaning "obligation" and standing for a rent charged on land. A close second was another kind of due called *Kutimai*, which translates as "occupancy dues". There was another, *Vetti* (from *Visti* in Sanskrit) which stood for compulsory labour services. It has been shown that the former was a "produce rent", that is, the fruits of the surplus labour of the producer while the latter was a "labour rent" extracted directly in the form of labour itself. Records show that references to *Katamai* and *Kutimai* went on increasing while those to *Vetti* went on decreasing. There were other exactions, most of which were charged on land. One also comes across taxes on professions.

As regards the administration of justice, there is less clarity. It appears that justice was meted out by community organisations. Thus, *Brahmanical* assemblies dealt with problems of justice among themselves and groups of other communities are found doing the same. We have information about the right of administering justice being given away to organisations of traders, as recorded in the Syrian Christian

Copper Plates from Kerala. Law was a matter of the standardisation of locally accepted practices, on which a stamp of recognition was put, sometimes in the form of quotations from the *Dharmasastra* texts. There are instances where new practices, which deviated from earlier ones, were recognised in this manner. Courts of law as such did not exist, local, communal organisations carrying out their function.

7.6 MILITARY AND POLICE

In the matter of policing functions, too, we have no detailed information; but records from Kerala show that the "Companions of Honour" of the locality chiefs did the duty of *Kàval* ("protection"). These "Companions of Honour", known as the "Hundred Organisations" as they were always referred to in terms of certain hundreds attached to particular chiefs (for example, the Six Hundred of Venad), constituted trusted body guards of the chiefs and formed his armed force which they could use in times of need. Such a body, a thousand strong, is seen in the case of the overlord, the Chera *Perumal* at the capital and following him constantly like a shadow. What is more, it is the same body that is found fighting for the suzerain of the chief, namely the Chera and even for the Chola upon the Chera overlord's bidding. In fact, at least in the case of Kerala, there is no evidence of a regular standing army, these "Companions of Honour" of the chiefs and the overlord constituting the "armed forces", much in the same way as the Janissaries in the Turkish system. It is probable that such bodies had a considerable role in enforcing the coercive power of other states as well. There are soldiers called *Velaikkarar* whom we come across in the case of the Pandyas and Cholas; and they shared all the characteristic features of such "companions". However, there is evidence of what can be taken as military "officers" in the inscriptions of the Cholas in the *Dandanayakams* and *Senapatis*, although there is no way in which their actual function can be ascertained. In any case, the picture of a huge military establishment, with a powerful army of "numerous regiments" and an equally impressive navy of "numberless ships" is exaggerated. Similarly, to deny that there was no coercive power at all which the state enjoyed is to overlook evidence. A system with the bodyguards of the chiefs and those of the king at the capital, supplemented by mercenaries recruited *ad hoc*, and led by local landed elite with high-sounding titles and occasionally specialists in archery, horse-riding and riding elephants seems to be a more realistic picture about the military establishment of early medieval South India.

7.7 LOCALITY CHIEFS

Such an establishment of royal government at the centre did not wield any absolute power. There were many other nodes of power in the locality and at various levels. Perhaps second only to the king at the centre, whether Chera or Chola, were the chiefs in the localities, known to an earlier style of historiography as "feudatories". These are not, to be sure, confused with the landed magnates who held chiefly or even feudatory titles such as *Velan*, *Araiyan*, *Muventavelan*, etc. whom we have discussed earlier. These chiefs represented a continuation from an earlier period in many cases, for we hear names such as the *Ays*, *Vels*, *Muvas*, *Adigaimans*, *Malavas*, etc. for the chiefs in what is called the "Sangam" period. There are many new names which we do not come across in the records of an earlier period. All of them, however, recognised the overlordship of the Chera, Chola or Pandya. How exactly this was achieved is not recorded in the documents; the role of a policy of aggrandizement cannot be entirely ruled out. In any case, there is clear

evidence of the acknowledgement of the suzerainty of one of the three major powers such as the Chera, Chola or Pandya. This is expressed in various ways: starting from the dating of records in their territories in the regnal years of the overlords down to the complex network of political and matrimonial alliances among them and with them and the overlords, there is considerable evidence to show this superordinate-subordinate relationship. The role they played in the polities of early South India was crucial.

There were wide variations among these chiefs in many respects. Their territories varied widely in size. While a few claimed authority over vast areas of land, others had their command over a handful of villages. Some of the chiefs flaunted the *Kshatriya* status while most others were not as ambitious. Some had elaborate establishments of 'administration', including what passed for a bureaucracy, while some others were much humbler. All had bodies of "Companions of Honour" which functioned as the military and police force in the territory. In times of necessity, such forces were either offered to, or commanded by, the overlord. Thus we see that there were the soldiers of the chief of Valluvanadu in Kerala, fighting the famous Battle of Takkolan for and on behalf of their Chera overlords, who were themselves subordinate to the Cholas in that period. We see the overlords claiming and taking a part of the revenue from the territories of the chiefs. The famous Syrian Christian Copper Plates speak of the one-tenth share of the Chera overlord. There are many instances where the proceeds are distributed in the 2:1 ratio between the overlord and the local chief, showing also the hierarchy between them. There is a rich material giving information regarding the matrimonial relations between the chiefly houses and the house of the overlord, which strengthened this kind of a relation of subordination/superordination. This relation is also seen in the fact that the chiefs were required to attend the court of the suzerain when occasions demanded. Thus we have the attestations of all the major chiefs of Kerala in the Jewish Copper Plates of the Chera king, Bhàskara Ravi Varman (AD 1000), and the presence of nearly all of them in the Chola court as mentioned in the *Kalingattup-parani*.

There is a peculiar pattern that we see about these chiefs in the case of the Chola state. They function more or less in the same way as in other situations, showing allegiance in the multiple ways mentioned above. By the time we come to the period of Ràjaràja I, all these chiefs disappear mysteriously from the records as rulers of their traditional territories. They appear, instead, as functionaries of the state, along with the landed magnates who held high-sounding titles. It is significant that they are now seen in areas far away from their former home territories. They were integrated into the state system, which was made stronger by Ràjaràja. In about a little more than a hundred years, the chiefs start reappearing, once again in their old role and assert themselves with a vengeance. Interestingly, this is exactly in the same pattern of the increase in the number of royal functionaries, the strengthening of the establishment of land revenue and the greater power that the military arm of the state had acquired.

7.8 LOCAL GROUPS: THE BASIS OF POWER

The local groups, which constituted the real basis of power in early medieval South India, played a somewhat unique role in these polities. They have been subjects of endless discussions and debates in modern historical writings, although not exactly as the foundation of power in these polities. Of these, the one body about which there is a plethora of writings is the *Sabha*, the assembly of *Brahmanas* controlling

vast extent of property in agricultural land both in their own name and the name of the temples around which they were settled. But this richness of information is only a result of the records: it is in such *Brahmanical* villages and their temples that we have the largest number of inscriptions. However, the population of the *Brahmanical* groups was comparably less than that of the rest and the landed wealth that they enjoyed, albeit out of proportion to the population. The agrarian settlements of the former, called *Brahmadeyans* in the Tamil speaking regions and *Gramams* in Kerala, were much less numerous than the non-*Brahmanical* villages, called the *Vellanvakai* ("of the *vellalas*") in the Tamil country or simply the *urs*. It is true that the information regarding the *Ur* is much less; but that should not give the impression that they were less important. In fact, it will be a mistake not to realise that they were much more numerous and thus had greater influence on the economy, society and polity. Records of the more literate sections of society are always apt to be more numerous and elaborate, and self-assertive, than those of others.

Unfortunately, the information regarding these groups in the Pandya and Chera situations is much less than what is available about the Chola situation, obviously owing to the fact that there are more numerous records for the Chola than in the two former cases. Perhaps the non-Brahamanical section of the land-owning groups was better organised in the Chola country. In any case, their existence and vitality are not to be doubted. By the time we come to the age and region of the Cheras, we have much more copious information regarding the *Ur* settlements of these non-Brahmana groups. Of late, there have been refreshing studies of the constitution and functioning of these groups in the Chola country. Physically, they constituted habitation sites, cremation grounds, drinking water sources and irrigation channels, cultivated land, pasture land, etc. The residential areas consisted of the quarters of the landowners (*Ur-nattam* or *Ur-irukkai*), that of the artisans (*Kammanacceri*), that of the agrestic labourers (*Paraicceri*). This demonstrates the stratified nature of society and its necessary adjunct of social distancing. The *Kutis* or households constituted the basic unit; the labourers and artisans formed the primary producers in South India in this period. The landowners, called *Ulukutis,* held different superior rights over land, and members, or elders, of such *Kutis* formed the title-holding magnates or the agents of the state mentioned in an earlier section. These landowners met in their assemblies of the *Ur*, known also as *Urar* and *Urom*. These assemblies, although they did not have the kind of restrictive qualifications which characterised the *Brahamanical Sabhas*, were still exclusive groups of the elders of families possessing landed property and commanding authority in the countryside. They deliberated, and decided, on matters of property and other interests of the whole community in the village. It related itself with the state, functioning also as a channel of communication between the king's government on the one hand and the bottom layers of the political structure on the other. However, this should not be confused with the colonial construction which gives centrality to "the village" in the political economy of pre-modern India.

In discussing the local groups in early medieval South India, the *Nadu* has a place of great importance. Till recently, historians had only recognised this as just another local group. It is only in recent years that they have taken up a systematic study of the *Nadu* as "the basic building block" of the political structure of South India under the Cholas. The expression *Nadu*, like *Ur*, denoted both the locality and the assembly of its spokesmen. The constituents of this assembly, which was also known by the terms *Nattar* or *Nattom*, were the dominant landed magnates of the locality, exactly as it was in the case of the *Ur* assembly. The *nadu*, as territory, was a grouping of the *Vellanvakai* villages, i.e., the non-*Brahamanical* agrarian

settlements. Statements in inscriptions, mentioning particular *Urs* as belonging to particular *Nadus*, help us identify the territory of the *Nadus*. They had no natural boundaries – there are even cases of *Nadus* lying on either side of the Kaveri, demonstrating the fact of these being spontaneous groupings of agrarian settlements. They were widely disparate in size, varying from a handful of square miles to a few hundreds and comprising *Urs* varying from one to forty. Even the nomenclature of *Nadus* is a strong indication of the spontaneity of their origin. The *Nadu* was named after one of the constituent *urs* mostly the first clan settlement to emerge, and that was generally a toponym. This contrasts with the artificial units called *Valanadus* which were clearly administrative divisions of an artificial nature: they had natural boundaries, they were more or less comparable in size and most of all, they were given the name of a Chola ruler or his title.

The situation in other regions conforms to this pattern. In the Pallava territory, the *Kottam* was a larger unit, within which *Nadus* emerged. It was mainly pastoral in its origin but with the increase in agricultural regions it became an agricultural-cum-pastoral region. But they had a greater pastoral content about them. Otherwise they answered to the *Nadus* in every respect. In the case of the Pandyan kingdom, too, the *Nadus* had comparable nature and functions. It was, however, different in Kerala under the Chera kingdom, where the term *Nadu* was used for the territory of the locality chiefs. Even in the case of the Cholas, the number of *Nadus* went on increasing as time progressed – a result of the expansion of the agrarian order and an endorsement of the thesis that the *Nadus* were groupings of agrarian villages.

The *Nadus* being groupings of agrarian villages and the *Nattar*, its dominant agriculturists, the prime concern of the body was agriculture itself. They took care of the management of irrigation and other arrangements related to agriculture. It was the *Nadu* that paid the tax to the king's government. Revenue items such as *Nattuppuravu*, *Nattuvari* etc. are mentioned in the documents. There are also suggestions that the *Nadus* maintained some functionaries of its own. In any case, the role of the *Nadu,* in carrying out the royal orders regarding the delimitation of boundaries of fields, resettling land and effecting grants of land, collection and remittance of tax, managing temples and their endowments on behalf of the royal establishment, and so on, was important. It follows that the *Nadu* was thus recognised by the state as its agent in the locality, exercising power and authority for and on its behalf. The *Nadu* was an inseparable part of the state system, evolved from below but integrated organically within the larger system.

There were other groups at the local level. The best known of these were the *Brahmdeyams* or *Brahamanical* villages. Corporate bodies known as the *Sabhàs*, of which the members were Brahmanas who owned property and had sufficient knowledge of the Vedas and *Sastras*, managed the affairs of the *Brahmadeya* villages. The constitution, functioning and other details of these bodies show that they followed the prescriptions in the *Dharmasastras* to the last letter. The highly disciplined way in which these bodies conducted themselves points to the solidarity they had as groups comprising of non-cultivating intermediaries with superior rights over land placed between the cultivating peasantry and the state. This solidarity was maintained, as thousands of inscriptions recording the proceedings of such assemblies demonstrate. Celebrated records such as the Manur inscription (9th century) of Pandya Maran Cadaiyan or the two Paràntaka inscriptions from Uttaramerur (10th century) amply demonstrate this unmistakable class and caste interest of the *Brahmanical* groups. To look upon them as instances of democracy at grass-root levels is not only an anachronism created in nationalist approaches or historiography

but also opposed to facts. The idea of democracy cannot be linked to a society based on caste, and habitually conscious of the principle of hierarchy, where power and control were in the hands of those who owned property.

There were similar bodies called the *Nagarams* where traders organised themselves. The ways in which they were constituted and they functioned were similar to the corporate bodies of other groups. We have detailed information in relation to the Syrian Christian trading settlement in Kollam in Southern Kerala. There is information of a comparable nature from other parts of South India as well. Administrative, fiscal and judicial rights were given away to the trading groups in such *Nagarams*. It is interesting that, apart from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups of a West Asian origin, there were similar groups of local origins as well. The way in which trade and trading groups influenced statecraft in these polities was quite decisive.

7.9   IDEOLOGY

No discussion of polity can be complete without considering the social parameters which made it possible and the ideological props that it had. We have seen in the section on historical background that, following the opening up of river valleys and the expansion of rice culture, a stratified society had emerged and got consolidated in this part of the country. This stratification expressed itself in the institution of *Jati*, with innumerable gradations in it according to economic, social and ritual status. In fact, state in South India had developed as a consequence of the emergence of a stratified society with its multiple hierarchy getting its sanction from the principles of *Varnasramadharma*. The acceptance of the graduated hierarchy and its organising principle, which had clearly a North Indian origin, was not easy. This was achieved in a complex way. One of the most effective means was through religion and the ideology it represented. It is significant that temples had emerged as veritable landed magnates in this period and this meant that a major section of the population had come to depend on the temple as tenants, sub-tenants, servants of different descriptions and so on. This took the temple a long way, apart from being an institution catering to the 'spiritual' needs of the public. It is in this context that a major popular movement known as the "*Bhakti* Movement" acquires importance. Historians in recent years have brought out the way in which the "*Bhakti* Movement", which had been perceived at best as a religious and a literary phenomenon, reflected and legitimised the new order of things in economy, society and polity. It sanctified the ties of dependence in society; it made suffering and surrender sweet. What it really achieved was a smooth acceptance of a new form of society and polity through the ideological prop it provided. It is quite another matter that the temples, which were so popularised and strengthened in one of the most dynamic and forward-looking movements in the history of South India, became bastions of orthodoxy and centres of obscurantism in the centuries to follow. But then, that is the way of history.

7.10   CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

In concluding our discussion, it may be useful to look at how such a polity was conceptualised by historians from time to time. In the beginning of the twentieth century, when historians, who were heavily under the influence of the romantic tradition of Western historiography and participating vicariously in Indian National Movement, put together information regarding the Pandyan and Chola kingdoms for

the first time, they were regarded as so many "empires". Thus the chapter headings of Nilakanta Sastri's *Pandyan Kingdom* (1929) speak about the "first empire", "second empire", etc. He represented the Chola state as a highly centralised empire, presided over by a "Byzantine royalty" and comprising of a "numerous and powerful bureaucracy", supported by a coercive power consisting of an impressive army of "numerous regiments" and an equally impressive navy of "numberless ships", an elaborate revenue mechanism, but also with vital local bodies with considerable autonomy. What Sastri wrote became a model for other historians to follow; and historiography in South India acquired a conventional quality about it with a heavy resistance to change. The picture continued without any major alteration till the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Burton Stein exposed the contradictions in this construction, showing that a strong centre and autonomous local groups do not go together. Using the impressive findings of Y.Subbarayalu in relation to the political geography of the Chola country, Stein sought to explain evidence from medieval South India in terms of the model of "segmentary state", which A.Southall had used to explain the situation in the East African society of the Alur. Accordingly, South India in this period was characterised by a multiplicity of centres, a political centre being identified in each of the 550 *Nadu* divisions, a dual sovereignty of the actual political and a ritual variety, specialised administrative staff in each of the centres and a pyramidal segmentation. This model is not quite acceptable for various reasons, the most important among which is that it was first constructed to explain a tribal lineage society in Africa and does not suit a highly stratified society with widespread literacy and impressive monumental architecture that is found in medieval South India.

The much-debated model of "Indian feudalism", too, has been tried in the context of early medieval South India. M.G.S.Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat argued that the *Bhakti* Movement in South India was actually feudal in its content. Veluthat has argued further that the entire political structure in early medieval South India had a feudal character about it. The general criticism against Indian feudalism are valid in this case also. Noboru Karashima and his associates have taken up a quantitative analysis of the information contained in the epigraphical material of early medieval South India. The results of such a systematic work replace the speculation of an earlier period, making it possible to test the different thesis with greater confidence. At the end of the day, the result of the entire enterprise is the considerable clarity that has been achieved in relation to the understanding of the polities in early medieval South India.

7.11 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have discussed the political structure of the South Indian Kingdoms which emerged in the early medieval period. The important kingdoms of this period were: Pandeyas of Madurai, Cheras of Mahodayapuram and Cholas of Thanjavur. The political organisation of this period was based on hereditary monarchy. The king and his establishment was an important constituent of the political formation. Under the Cholas landed magnates functioned as state agents and constituted the officialdom. The Cholas had developed an elaborate revenue machinery. The administration of justice was conducted by local communities. The military establishment comprised of bodyguards of kings and chiefs and mercenaries led by landed elite. Apart from the Chera, Chola and Pandya kings the realm was ruled by several chiefs who recognised the suzerainty of Chera, Chola and Pandyas. In

the later period, these chiefs got transformed into state functionaries like the landed magnates. They were absorbed into the state system. The political aspirations of the local groups were articulated through the assemblies; *Sabha* (assembly of *Brahmins*) and *Ur* (assembly of non-brahmans). The *Nadus* comprising of the *Urs* were the building blocks of south Indian polity in this period. The nagarams (corporate body of traders) and *Brahmadeyas* (*brahmanical* villages) and *Sabhas* were the important local bodies of this period. In South India the emergence of state is attributed to social stratification derived from the principles of *Varnashramadharam*. Religion and its ideology also helped in providing legitimacy to the state. Various perspectives related to the study of political organisation of the South Indian kingdoms help us in critically analysing the nature of polity of this period.

7.12 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the nature of political organisation at the local level between 8th to 12th centuries in peninsular India.

2) Analyse the nature of royal establishment in the political structure of peninsular India (8th to 12th century A.D.).

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