

The Administrative Structure of the Gupta and Vakataka Kingdoms

From c. 300 CE onwards, political hierarchies can be identified by the titles of rulers, which reflect relations of paramountcy and subordination. Gupta kings assumed imperial titles such as maharajadhiraja, parama-bhattaraka, and parameshvara. They also connected themselves with the gods through epithets such as parama-daivata (the foremost worshipper of the gods) and parama-bhagavata (the foremost worshipper of Vasudeva Krishna). Some historians have suggested that the Gupta kings claimed divine status. For instance, the Allahabad prashasti describes Samudragupta as a god dwelling on earth, as Purusha (the Supreme Being) and as the equal of the gods Dhanada (Kubera), Varuna, Indra, and Antaka (Yama). Such assertions can be seen as reflections of an attempt to exalt the king's status by comparing him with the gods, rather than as an assertion of the king's divinity.

Seals and inscriptions mention official ranks and designations, whose precise meaning is often uncertain. The term kumaramatya occurs on six Vaishali seals, which suggests that this title represented a high-ranking officer associated with an office (adhikarana) of his own. The designation 'amatya' occurs on several Bhita seals, and the kumaramatya seems to have been pre-eminent among amatyas and equivalent in status to princes of royal blood. Kumaramatyas were variously attached to the king, crown prince,

revenue department, or a province. One of the Vaishali seals refers to a *kumaramatya* who seems to have been in charge of the maintenance of the sacred coronation tank of the Lichchhavis.

Individuals of the rank of *kumaramatya* sometimes had additional designations as well, and such ranks could be hereditary. For example, Harishena, composer of the Allahabad *prashasti*, was a *kumaramatya*, *sandhivigrahi*, and *mahadandanayaka*, and Kumaragupta mentions two generations of *mantri-kumaramatyas* who served two generations of kings—Shikharasvamin who served Chandragupta II, and Shikharasvamin's son Prithivishena, who served Kumaragupta I. Prithivishena is subsequently described as *mahabaladhikrita*.

The Gupta empire was divided into provinces known as *deshas* or *bhuktis*, administered by governors who were usually designated as *uparikas*. The *uparika* was directly appointed by the king and, in turn, frequently appointed the head of the district administration and the district town board. A Vaishali seal refers to the office of the *uparika* of Tirabhukti. One of the Damodarpur copper plates (which refers to Gupta era years 124 and 129) describes Chiratadatta, the *uparika* of Pundravardhana *bhukti*, as appointed by the king (Kumaragupta I). It further states that Chiratadatta appointed *kumaramatya* Vetravarman as head of the *adhisthana adhikarana* (district office) of Kotivarsha. Another Damodarpur plate (of unknown date) tells us that Kumaragupta I appointed *maharaja* Jayadatta as *uparika* of the same province, and that Jayadatta in turn appointed the *ayuktaka* Bhandaka as head of the *adhisthana adhikarana* of Kotivarsha. The Damodarpur plate of the reign of Vishnugupta, dated in year 224 of the Gupta era, mentions an *uparika* whose name is lost, but who has the epithets *maharaja*, *bhattaraka*, and *rajaputra* and who appointed Svayambhudeva as *vishayapati*. It also refers to the *uparika* as carrying on the administration 'with the enjoyment of [the rule] consisting of elephants, horses, and soldiers', indicating his control over the military machinery as well. The fact that the *uparika* had the title *maharaja* in three of the Damodarpur plates indicates his high status and rank in the administrative hierarchy. The Eran pillar inscription of Budhagupta, dated Gupta year 165, refers to *maharaja* Surasmichandra as a *lokapala* governing the land between the Kalindi and Narmada rivers. *Lokapala* here seems to refer to a provincial governor.

Saurashtra was an important province of the Gupta empire. Skandagupta's Junagarh inscription provides details about the Sudarshana lake that had been built during the Maurya period and repaired in Rudradaman's time. It states that Skandagupta appointed Parnadatta as *goptri* (governor) of Surashtra (Saurashtra). Parnadatta in turn appointed his son Chakrapalita to govern the city where this inscription was inscribed. In Gupta year 136 (i.e., 455–56 CE), the Sudarshana lake burst its embankments due to torrential rain and Chakrapalita had the breach repaired after two years' work in the year 137 (i.e., 456–57 CE). The inscription thus reflects the practice of the delegation of official responsibilities from father to son, and the role of the provincial government in initiating the repair of waterworks.

The provinces of the Gupta empire were divided into districts known as *vishayas*, under officers known as *vishayapatis*. The *vishayapati* seems to have been generally appointed by the provincial governor. However, the Indore copper plate inscription dated in Gupta year 146, during the reign of king Skandagupta, suggests that this was not always the case. It describes the *vishayapati* Sharvanaga who was governing Antaravedi (which referred either to the area around Indore or Kanauj) as being favoured by the king, which suggests that he owed his appointment to him. It may be noted that the Eran pillar inscription of the time of the Huna ruler Toramana refers to Airakina *vishaya*, indicating an element of continuity in administrative divisions in post-Gupta times.

Significant details of district-level administration in Bengal are reflected in the Damodarpur copper plates dated in Gupta year 124 during the reign of Kumaragupta I. These record orders regarding certain land transactions issued to village officials by the *adhikarana* of Kotivarsha *vishaya*. The *adhisthana adhikarana* of Kotivarsha had five

members—the *uparika* or *vishayapati* (who was the head), the *nagara-sreshthin* (chief merchant/banker), *sarthavaha* (chief caravan trader), *prathama-kulika* (chief artisan or merchant), and *prathama-kayastha* (chief scribe or an officer in charge of revenue collection). This indicates that the *vishayapati* was assisted in his administrative duties by certain prominent members of the town.

Administrative units below district level included clusters of settlements known variously as *vithi*, *patta*, *bhumi*, *pathaka*, and *petha*. There are references to officials known as *ayuktakas* and *vithi-mahattaras*. At the village level, villagers chose functionaries such as the *gramika* and *gramadhyaksha*, and village elders also had an important role to play in various matters. The Damodarpur copper plate of the reign of Budhagupta (of Gupta year 163) mentions an *ashtakula-adhikarana* (a board of eight members) headed by the

An ancient panchayat?

Eight inscriptions at the Buddhist monastic site of Sanchi in central India belong to the period c. 300–600 CE. Of these, one is an 11-line prose epigraph inscribed on the outer side of the eastern gateway of Stupa 1. The inscription is damaged in places and there are disagreements among scholars regarding its reading and interpretation. It is dated in year 93 (of the Gupta era), i.e., 412–13 CE, and refers to the reign of *maharajadhiraja* Chandragupta, mentioned in Line 7 as 'Devaraja'. This king was no doubt Chandragupta II.

The inscription opens with a eulogy of the *sangha* of the *mahavihara* of Kanakadabota. It goes on to introduce Amrakarddava, son of Undana, who belonged to the Sukuli country and was apparently a military commander of Chandragupta II. The inscription records the gift of a piece of land (perhaps a village) named Ishvaravasaka and 25 *dinaras*. The gift was made in perpetuity. Half of the endowment—this seems to refer to the income from the land—was to support the feeding of five monks and the maintenance of a lamp in the *ratnagriha* (literally, jewel house, apparently a shrine), on behalf of Chandragupta. The other half of the income—this appears to refer to the interest on the monetary gift—was to support the feeding of five monks and the maintenance of a lamp in the *ratnagriha* on behalf of Amrakarddava himself.

There is disagreement concerning the interpretation of Lines 5 and 6. According to N. G. Majumdar, these indicate that the land was bought from certain members of the royal household or family

(*rajakula*) named Maja, Sharabhanga, and Amrarata. Fleet thought likewise. On the other hand, Chhabra and Gai understood '*rajakula*' as a palace and interpret Maja, Sharabhanga, and Amrarata as names of palaces occupied by Chandragupta II during his military campaigns. According to this interpretation, Ishvaravasaka was bought from the proceeds of the sale of these palaces. D. C. Sircar accepted the standard meaning of *rajakula* as royal family, but added that it seems as though one half of the money and the price of the *vasaka* (which he tentatively translated as 'house-site') was paid by Amrakarddava and the other half by his friends. Chhabra and Gai suggested that since the income from the land and the interest on the money were supposed to support identical activities, the two gifts must have been of similar value.

Line 6 also contains the phrase *panchamandalya pranipatyā*. Fleet amended *mandalya* to *mandalyam* and saw herein a reference to Amrakarddava having prostrated himself before the village panchayat before making the gift. N. G. Majumdar retained the phrase *panchamandalya pranipatyā*, and translated it as 'having prostrated himself together with the group of five', adding that he was not sure about the meaning. According to D. R. Bhandarkar and G. S. Gai, Fleet's amended reading and interpretation of this line do not make sense, because if the *panchamandali* was indeed a village body, one would expect this word to appear in the accusative and not in the locative case. They suggest that the phrase in question refers

to Amrakarddava prostrating himself (prior to making the gift) so that five parts of his body—forehead, elbows, waist, knees, and feet—rested on the ground.

What is to be made of these controversies? The interpretation of *panchamandali* as referring to a panchayat-type village body consisting of five individuals seems more plausible than the other suggestions. The reference to Amrakarddava prostrating himself before or saluting this body before making this gift fits in well with the details of several other land grant inscriptions of this period, which reflect the role of local-level administrative departments and functionaries in land transactions. Likewise, the reference to the land being bought—either from or by certain members of a royal family, prior to being gifted, is also in tune with several land grant charters. Perhaps the emperor Chandragupta was associated with the grant of land and Amrakarddava with the monetary gift. On the other hand, while Chandragupta may have taken direct initiative in making the gift, it is also possible that Amrakarddava was simply indicating his devotion to his king by expressing a desire that the latter should share in the religious merit that would accrue from this pious gift.

Although the interpretation of crucial parts of this inscription remains problematic, it should be noted that this is the only known record of a land grant made in favour of the Sanchi establishment.

SOURCE Chhabra and Gai, 1981: 251

mahattara. *Mahattara* has a range of meanings including village elder, village headman and head of a family or community. The Sanchi inscription of the time of Chandragupta II mentions the *pancha-mandali*, which may have been a corporate village body.

The Gupta king was assisted by a council of *mantrins* (ministers). The Allahabad *prashasti* refers to an assembly or council, presumably of ministers—known as the *ratna-grahika* (minister for peace and war), who seems to have been a high-ranking officer in charge of the conduct of relations with other states, including initiating war and concluding alliances and treaties. Harishena, composer of the Allahabad *prashasti*, was (among other things) a *sandhivigrahika*. An Udayagiri inscription describes Virasena Shaba, a *sandhivigrahika* of Chandragupta II, as a poet. These two inscriptions indicate that officers who discharged the job of drafting treaties had much more than just basic skills of drafting and composition.

Several seals and inscriptions of c.300–600 CE mention the names of *dandanayakas* and *mahadandanayakas*, who were high-ranking judicial or military officers. One of the Vaishali seals mentions a *mahadandanayaka* named Agnigupta. The Allahabad *prashasti* refers to three *mahadandanayakas*. The fact that the composer of the *prashasti*, Harishena, a *mahadandanayaka* (with the additional titles of *sandhivigrahika* and *kumaramatyas*), was the son of *mahadandanayaka* and *khadyatapakita* Dhruvabhuti, suggests the hereditary nature of such important administrative posts. The inscription also mentions *mahadandanayaka* Tilakabhata as the executor of the inscription. A Bhita seal mentions a *mahadandanayaka* named Vishnurakshita. This official also had the designation *mahashvapati* (commander of the cavalry), clearly indicating military functions, and he is said to have appointed the *kumaramatya*.

Seals and inscriptions mention other military designations such as *baladhikrita* and *mahabaladhikrita* (commander-in-chief of the army). A Vaishali seal mentions Yakshavatsa, a *bhatashvapati* (commander of infantry and cavalry). The standard term *senapati* does not occur in Gupta inscriptions, but is mentioned in some Vakataka epigraphs. A Vaishali seal mentions the *ranabhandagaradhikarana*—office of the military storehouse. Another Vaishali seal mentions the *adhikarana* (office) of the *dandapashika*, which may have been a district-level police office.

The officials connected specifically with the royal establishment included the *mahapratihara* (chief of the palace guards) and the *khadyatapakita* (superintendent of the royal kitchen). A Vaishali seal mentions a person named Vinayashura, described as both a *mahapratihara* and a *taravara*. (It is interesting to note that the latter also occurs as a title of high rank in earlier inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda.) The top layer of the administrative structure also included *amatyas* and *sachivas*, who were executive officers in charge of various departments. The system of espionage included spies known as *dutakas*.

The *ayuktakas* were another cadre of high-ranking officers. It is possible that there is some similarity between their functions and those of the *yuktas* of the Ashokan inscriptions and *Arthashastra*. The Allahabad *prashasti* describes Samudragupta's *ayuktakas* as ceaselessly engaged in restoring wealth to the many conquered kings. One of the Damodarpur plates mentions an *ayuktaka* who was also a *bhandaka* and head of the district town administration of Kotivarsha *vishaya*. A Vaishali seal mentions the *adhikarana* of the *vinayashitisthapaka* of Tirabhukti. The term *vinayashitisthapaka* has been translated as 'one who maintains moral and social discipline', but the precise functions of this officer are unclear.

Vakataka inscriptions offer comparatively less information regarding administrative structure. The Vakataka empire was divided into provinces called *rashtras* or *rajyas*. For instance, the Pakkana *rashtra* is mentioned in the Belora plates, the Bhojakata *rashtra* in the Chammaka plates, the Varuchha *rajya* in the Pandhurna plates, and the Arammii *rajya* in the Dudia and Padhurna plates (all these inscriptions belong to the reign of Pravarasena II). The *rajyas* were administered by governors known as *rajyadhikritas*. Provinces were further subdivided into *vishayas*, which were in turn divided into *aharas* and *bhogas* or *bhuktis*. Vakataka grants refer to an officer called the *sarvadyaksha*, who

appointed and directed subordinate officers known as *kulaputras*. The duties of the latter included the maintenance of law and order. The *chhatras* and *bhatas*, usually understood as referring to irregular and regular troops, represented the coercive arm of the state. They wandered about the countryside, extracting taxes due to the state, and may have also been responsible for maintaining law and order. The *rajuka*, known in Maurya sources as an officer connected with revenue assessment, is mentioned in the Indore plates of Pravarasena II as the writer of the land grant charter. The *senapati* and *dandanayaka* were military officers. Interestingly, the Vakataka charters are described as drafted in the *senapati*'s office. Inscriptions belonging to various years of the reign of Pravarasena II mention different persons as *senapati*. This either indicates changes in the occupancy of the post, or that several individuals had this designation.

An inscription outside Cave 16 at Ajanta records the gift of the cave to the Buddhist *sangha* by Varahadeva, a minister of the Vatsagulma branch of the Vakatakas. The first 20 verses give the genealogy of the reigning king Harishena. The inscription also describes Varahadeva and his father Hastibhoja who served as minister under Harishena and his father Devasena respectively. Hastibhoja is described as an abode of merit, as having a broad and stout chest, obliging, loving, affable, and as one who destroyed the allies of his enemies. He is said to have ruled his people well, being as dear to them as their father, mother, and friend. King Devasena is said to have entrusted the care of government to him and devoted himself to the enjoyment of pleasures. Varahadeva is said to have ruled the land well, possessing the virtues of liberality, forgiveness, and generosity. An inscription in the Ghatotkacha cave at Guwada, 11 miles west of Ajanta, records the dedication of the cave by a person whose name is lost, but who, going by other details, seems none other than Varahadeva. The inscription describes members of his family as excellent Brahmanas known as Valluras, after their native home. Vallura has been tentatively identified with a village called Velur in Karimnagar district of Karnataka. There is a long genealogy and eulogy of the family, and it seems that as many as nine generations served as ministers under the Vakatakas.

The inscriptions of feudatories of the Vakatakas refer to some additional administrative terms. The *rahasika*, mentioned in the Bamhani plates of Bharatabala, a ruler of Mekala, seems to have been a confidential officer attached to the king. The same inscription mentions the *gramakuta* or village headman. The *devavarika* (perhaps the same as *dauvarika*) may have been the head of the village police, while the *gandakas* may have been the equivalents of the *bhatas* of Vakataka grants. The *dronagrahanayaka* may have been in charge of the administrative unit known as the *dronagraha* or *dronamukha*.