



Southern India: Polity, Administration, Society and Art (500 - 750 A.D.)

Dr. Arun Kumar

Associate Professor, Department of History, Mahila College, Khagaul, Patna (Bihar)

Abstract:

The institutions of southern India were more firmly established at the time of Pallavas and maintained a remarkable continuity. The Pallava period saw the culmination of what had been a gradual process of assimilation of Aryan institutions, that of Aryan ideas being limited to the upper strata of society. Amongst the rest, there was a mixed interaction in which the indigenous culture sought to assert itself.

Keywords: *Pallava, Aryan, Institutions.*

Political Organisation and Administration

Amongst the Pallavas, kingship was held to be of divine origin and hereditary and they claimed descent from the God Brahma. On an occasion, however, when there was no direct heir, a king was elected, but this was not looked upon as something unheard of. Kings took high-sounding titles, such as *Maharajadhiraja* which were borrowed from the northern usage. Others were local inventions such as *Dharma-Maharajadhiraja* (great king of kings ruling in accordance with the *dharma*) and the more unusual *Agnishtoma-Vajapeya-Ashvamedhayaji* (he who has performed the *agnishtoma*, *vajapeya* and *ashvamedha* sacrifices) which sounds rather like a self-conscious declaration of conformity with Vedic ideas. The King 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 well have been appointed from among the feudatories. There was the usual hierarchy of officials in charge of provincial administration in Tamilnadu. The governor of a province was advised and assisted by officers in charge of districts who worked in close collaboration with local autonomous institutions, largely in an advisory capacity. These institutions appear to have been more common in the south as compared to northern India during this period. They were organised on local relationship of caste, profession and religious adherence. Frequent meetings and assemblies were essential to their functioning. Assemblies were of many varieties and at many levels, including those of merchants, of guilds, of craftsmen, artisans, students, ascetics and priests. There were many assemblies of villages and also of representatives of districts. General meeting of the members of an assembly were held annually, and those of smaller groups were more frequent and were responsible for implementing policy. The smaller groups were chosen by lots from amongst the eligible persons. Each group had specific functions to perform.

In the village, basic assembly was the *sabha*, which was concerned with all matters relating to the village, including endowments, irrigation, cultivated land, punishment of crime, keeping of a census and other necessary records. Village courts dealt with simple criminal cases. At a higher level, in towns and districts, courts were presided over by government officers, with the king as the supreme arbiter of justice. The *sabha* was a formal institution but it worked closely with the *urar*, an informal gathering of entire village. Above this was a district council which worked with a *nadu* or district administration. Villages which were populated entirely or largely by Brahmins have preserved records of the functioning of assemblies and councils. It is often said that these autonomous bodies were restricted to such villages alone and did not exist in villages with an overwhelmingly non-Brahmin population, for which records have not survived. But this does not, necessarily follow, for it is unlikely that village assemblies, if they were found useful in a particular set of villages, would not become the norm for all the villages in 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.

Society:

Perhaps, the most obvious sign of the influence of Aryan culture in the south at the time of the Pallavas was the pre-eminent position given to Brahmins both in the status and in gifts of land. The Brahmins came as keepers of the Vedic tradition, which they believed to be the most sacrosanct and valuable contribution of northern India. The Vedic tradition of Aryan culture



had to be preserved from much contamination which the *mlechhas* i.e. the Shakas, Kushanas and the Huns. As keepers of this tradition, they were venerated in the south and found their supports in the kings of the peninsula who, like most of the royalty anywhere, sought the highest respectability available by conforming to tradition; in this case the tradition as interpreted by the brahmins, whether through the performance of Vedic sacrifices or through liberal grants to those familiar with the Vedas. No doubt the kings felt that to conform with the Vedic pattern would bestow a higher status on them. The brahmins' claim to being in communication with the Gods, and their supposed ability to manipulate the unseen powers, was more convincing to the Tamil kings than claims of the indigenous priests.

Varnas:

Consciousness of varnas had played a significant role in social relationships in the south India. The brahmins stood out distinct from the rest of society, confident of their privileged position. For the south Indian brahmin, prestige as a religious leader and economic power came almost simultaneously. They were generally exempted from tax, many of them owned land, and in addition enjoyed royal patronage. They were the symbols of what was in origin an alien culture, but their very security and status brought them added respect. Unlike the north Indian brahmin landowners, the southern brahmins were more adventurous and invested their surplus income in commerce. In certain areas, their commercial enterprises were such that the brahmins came to be associated with the trading castes. Some even travelled to south-east Asia, where they settled down in spite of the ban on crossing the ocean.

Societal organisation was based on the *varna* framework, but expressed through two broad categories - the brahmin and the non brahmin within most of the occupational groups were placed in a ritual hierarchy around the temple, the concept of purity-pollution operating at all levels, thus keeping the untouchables out of the temple precincts. The north Indian evidence shows that untouchables were mainly those who came from 'culturally backward' tribal groups and were condemned to take up menial work and sometimes impure work like carrying dead bodies and sweeping the streets etc. With the growing economic disparity and the large scale dissemination of Brahmanical ideas in the early medieval period, the tribal groups such as the Paraiya became the untouchables in south India, the shudras were divided into (i) clean shudras - whose touch was not polluting and (ii) the unclean shudras, who were debarred from entry into the temple. The absence of a vaishya category in this region has been attributed to the growth of the Brahmanical *agrahara* in an agricultural setting, where trade was not a very important factor in the economy of these regions at this stage and the number of communities dependent on trade must have been fairly small to have been practically ignored in the records of this period. In the case of the kshatriya *varna*, the indigenous ruling families acquired the kshatriya status and politico-economic dominance. The participation of the ruling families in these processes was an important aspect of the brahmins, who composed the genealogies for them, and was mainly intended to establish a socio-political dominance with economic privileges, through religious network, the strongest thread in the fabric of the medieval agrarian system. The Pallavas, who were alien to the Tamil country and had imbibed Brahmanical ideas in their original home, that is the Andhra region claimed to be *brahma-kshatriyas* tracing their descent to the Brahma, but emphasising their kshatriyahood for political dominance. This is, however, relevant only in explaining the imposition of the *varna* framework or non-Indo Aryan societies.

The principles of heredity inherent in the *varna* framework would seem to have been stretched so as to bring all these social groups within its vortex under the *jati* label. Thus we find the *varna jati* division coalescing in many cases, with the economic or professional groups. The picture which emerges suggests that the brahmins were in control of the powerful position and that the non-brahmin were more or less working for them. The brahmins naturally emphasised caste loyalties and caste assemblies since this would prevent a wider basis of unity developing amongst the non-brahmins.

Art:

A little before A.D.600, the centre of artistic activity shifted from north central India to southern India, where there was a hectic temple building activity under the Pallavas at Mahabalipuram, Kanchi and other centres, under the Chalukya at Badami, Aihole, Mahakuta, Pattadakal, Alampur, Kudaveli, Sangameshwara and at several centres in eastern India and Bihar. The Pallavas in the far south were great patrons of art, especially cave and temple architecture. Pallava temples were usually free standing buildings, but the vogue set by the Buddhists for cave temples still continued. The brahmins and the Buddhists vied with each other in cutting shrines and temples into the Deccan hills, whereby this time, worship at these shrines may have been open to anyone, the rivalry between the two religions not being particularly felt by ordinary people.

Rock-cut temples were common in the Pallava period and these were akin to the Buddhist cave shrines. The monolithic temples at Mahabalipuram, for instance, still show traces of barrel vaults and archways generally associated with the Buddhist cave shrines of Deccan. In this period, when the *bhakti* poets sang devotional hymns in temples of south India, we come across



one of the grandest depictions of Krishna lifting the mount Govardhana at Mahabalipuram, the sea-port of the Pallavas. Here, the spectator (devotee) can himself become a part of the scene of cowherds away from the time of day-to-day existence. Another panoramic vision can also be had at Mahabalipuram in one of the greatest moments of India's narrative art depicting the descent of the Ganga or Arjuna's penance.

At Mahabalipuram, we have several rock-cut caves. In one of these, the Adivaraha cave (first half of the 7th Century), we have effigies of Pallava King Mahendra Varman and his two queens, the later typified by their slender forms. The rock-cut caves are known as *mandapas* and display many splendid sculptures; the Adivaraha cave, for example, shows Gajalakshmi on a high pedestal in the midst of four female attendants. The Durga cave shows a very remarkable group: Mahishasuramardini, a dynamic eight-armed figure riding a lion and confronting the buffalo-headed demon, Mahisha. In the Panchapandava cave, there are two impressive reliefs: one showing Krishna lifting Govardhana, and the other depicting him milking cows. The five monolithic temples known as *rathams* belong to the reign of Mahamalla. These are the earliest specimens of rock-cut temple art illustrating different type of superstructure. The Dharmaraja *ratham* is the highest and has a portrait of Mahamalla himself. The statue of Ardhanarishwara in the same cave is very impressive. The Draupadi *ratham* is the most elegant in this group being merely a cell or *paranasala* and its roof playing a copy of a thatched structure.

Another type of Pallava monument is the *tirtham* or magnificent open air carving in relief on a rock surface. The one known as Arjuna penance in fact represents *Gangavatarana*. Two large boulders with the narrow fissure are carved with several rows of gods and goddesses. In the centre is an ascetic (*rishi*) standing on his left foot and to his right are the figures of gods and goddesses, hunters and wild animals. The *rishi* seated with bent back in front of a *paranasala* type of temple, is identified as Bhagiratha, who performed severe austerities for the descent of Ganga.

In the reign of Rajasimha the rock-cut technique was replaced by the structural temple of masonry and stone. The so-called shore temple of Jalashayanawami is built of dressed stone of excellent workmanship. It has a square lower storey and a pyramidal *shikhara*—in diminishing tiers—noteworthy for its lightness and soaring quality. Another remarkable monument of the reign of Rajasimha is the Kailashanath temple at Kanchipuram built about 700 A.D. and consists of three separate parts, a sanctum with a pyramidal tower, a *mandapa* and a rectangular courtyard showing a series of subsidiary shrines or cells. This architectural design was adopted in the Virupaksha temple of the Chalukyas and the monolithic Kailash temple of the Rashtrakutas.

The walls of the Buddhist cave shrines were covered with murals illustrating Buddhist narratives. Whilst treating a religious theme, these murals displaced a rich cross-section of contemporary life. To cover the walls of deep-cut caves with murals was an achievement of no mean order, considering the difficulty of adequate lighting and working conditions in these vast caves. Murals were common not only in cave temples but also in the free standing temples of the South. In the case of the former, some of the murals may have been painted by the monks, although artist must have been employed in most cases in order to arrive at the professional excellence of the examples such as those visible today at Ajanta, Bagh and Kanchipuram. Murals were not restricted to religious monuments alone, since judging by literary descriptions, domestic architecture was also embellished with painting, but unfortunately these have not survived.

The free-standing temples at Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram in the Tamil country and at Aihole and Badami in the Deccan provide a better background for sculpture than the rock-cut temples. The Deccan style in sculpture shows a close affinity to the Guptas. Pallava sculpture owes more to the Buddhist tradition and remained on the whole both more monumental and more definitely linear in form, avoiding the tendency to ornamentation which occurred quite early in the Deccan sculpture. Yet the sculpture and architecture of the Deccan and Tamil Nadu were not mere offshoots of the northern tradition. They are distinctly recognizable as different and have a personality of their own, the basic form was taken from the older tradition, but the end- result unmistakably reflected its local genius.

References

1. F. Hultsch, South Indian Inscription, Delhi, 1972
2. F. Kingsburg and G.E. Philips, Hymns of the Tamil Shaivite Saints, Calcutta, 1921
3. Manimegalai (tr.) K.A. Aiyangar, London, 1928
4. Shilappadikaram (tr.) V.R.R. Diskshitar, The Lady of the Anklet Oxord, 1939



5. G. Yazdani (ed), *The Early History of the Deccan*, London, 1960.
6. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India* Oxford University Press, 1958
7. D.C. Sircar, *Successor of the Satavahans*, Calcutta, 1939
8. G.M. Moraes, *The Kadamba Kula*, Bombay, 1931
9. R. Gopalan, *History of the Pallavas of Kanchi*, Madras, 1928
10. C. Minakshi, *Administrative and Social life under the Pallavas*, Madras, 1977
11. M.S. Govinda Swamy, *The Role of Fuedatories in Pallava History*, Annamalai University, 1965
12. V. Balambal, *Feudatories of South India*, chugh publication, Allahabad, 1978
13. D.N. Jha, *Studies in Early Indian Economic History*, Delhi, 1980
14. Romila Thapar, *A. History of India, Vol. I*, 1976
15. K.M. Shrimali (ed.) *Essays in Indian Art, Religion & Society*, New Delhi, 1987
16. K.R. Srinivasan, *Temples of South India (2nd ed.)*, New Delhi, 1979

