INDIAN POLITICAL HISTORY - Postclassical Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Contents

Part I : Government

Overview   The systems of government that evolved over the many centuries of Indian history begin with (what we believe to have been) an egalitarian hunter-gatherer society in prehistoric time. From the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE), administrative systems oscillate between a centralised state and a federal state (based on regionalism), and some uneasy compromises between the two. The origins of the modern Indian state lie in the structures introduced by the Delhi Sultanate, refined by the Mughal Empire and finally encoded by British Rule. Although parliamentary democracy represents a leap into modernity, some of the fundamental administrative units and processes have not changed much since about 1500 CE.

Early Postclassical Period

Harsha   Although Harsha's kingdom was exceptional in terms of the extent of territory, its administration illustrates the political regionalism of the time. As with the other kingdoms in the south and on the edges of the Gangetic heartland, territory was defined less by administration than by language and sectarian affiliations. Boundaries were fluid. Although texts continued to use the old rhetoric of a central power, new political, linguistic, religious and literary boundaries were emerging. Indeed, the formal control of Harsha's state did not extend much beyond the Gangetic plain. Instead, the kingdom was held together by using land-grants to create alliances with local elites (called *mahasamanta*), leaving conquered rulers on their thrones. Texts list six different levels of vassals in Harsha's administration. One inscribed copper-plate dated 632 CE records a gift of land to two Brahmins and lists several vassals as guarantors of the gift. Meanwhile the centre contented itself with tribute and homage.

Chola Empire   The Chola kingdom (9-13th c. CE) is an even clearer example of local autonomy co-existing with imperial authority. The smallest administrative unit was the *nadu,* or locality, usually comprising several villages. The Chola kingdom contained several hundred *nadu*s, of varying size, suggesting that they were not artificially created by the state but were pre-existing units of local government. Each *nadu* had its own council, who were responsible for land assessment and tax collection. Although not appointed by the king, the local council passed on a portion of these taxes to the king's representative at the *nadu*-level. Each *nadu* incorporated one or more *nagaram*s, which were councils of powerful merchants who collectively owned land and collected taxes from peasants working that land. On top of this local, indigenous government, the Chola rulers created an administrative unit of the *valanadu* (or 'mega-nadu'), controlled by officers appointed by the court. The largest administrative unit, with several *valanadu*s, was the *mandalam*, or 'province.'

Chola Administration   Inscriptions mention four different officers, who were involved in revenue collection, land surveying and military operations. There were two grades of administrators, and the offices tended to be hereditary. The legal system was administered through a system of royal courts acting in liaison with village courts and caste councils. In addition to land tax, with four different categories depending on fertility, there were taxes on goods in transit, houses and professions.

Late Postclassical Period

Administration   The early Delhi Sultanate adapted a Persian model of government, making it more militaristic and aristocratic. The Sultan was nominally the head of all aspects of government, although in practice he had a number of ministers who were also responsible. His second-in-command was the Wazir, who headed the finance department and acted as head of the civil service. Next in importance came the Diwan-i-ariz, who was in charge of

the military and responsible for recruitment and discipline in the army. The Diwan-i-insha was the chief secretary to the sultan and in charge of all royal

correspondence. Three other ministers handled foreign affairs, religious affairs and judicial affairs. At the level of the province (*iqta*), administration was in the hands of military officers (*muqti*) and noblemen who were given land rent-free (*iqtadar*), both of whom were appointed by the Sultan. Provinces were divided into districts (*shiq*), which were sub-divided into group of villages (*paragana*).

Reforms   This basic structure was reformed by Sultan Alauddin (r. 1296-1316 CE) in order to extend central authority over his expanded territory. Following his successful defence of Delhi against two Mongol campaigns (1299, 1307-08), he conquered new territory in Gujarat and Rajasthan before driving deep into the south and taking the ancient Hindu city of Madurai in 1310. Thereafter, Alauddin undertook a massive land survey on the basis of which a standard tax was levied. Half the crop from arable land and a fixed tax on all herded animals was collected by military officers in the provinces and stored in state granaries. The net effect was to raise more revenue and to reduce the authority of local elites, who also faced new taxes on their horses, clothing and houses. Old ruling families, however, were permitted to retain their symbolic power as tributaries to Delhi. In effect, however, Delhi governed the countryside from a few garrisoned cities and plundered whenever the need arose.

Reforms Reversed   Most of these reforms were reversed by Alauddin's successor, Muhammad Tughluq (r.1324-1351 CE), who instituted a new department of agriculture dedicated to expanding arable land. He also reorganised the revenue department and demanded reports from provincial officers, showing income and expenditure. He also moved the capital (temporarily and foolishly) to the Deccan so that the centre, through its officers and its army, had more control over the provinces.

Vijayanagar kingdom   The advance of the sultanate to the south was only checked by the rise of the Vijayanagar kingdom (1336–1565 CE). The capital city (Vijayanagar, 'City of Victory') was a vast complex of temples (and mosques) that displayed wealth and ambition, but the kings gained their control by a skilful network of alliances with adjacent Hindu and minor Muslim rulers. They even improved their army by recruiting Muslim soldiers and borrowing their techniques of warfare. And when the Portuguese arrived on the west coast of India in 1498, they were quick to enter into treaty and trade arrangements.

Part II : Military

Overview   As a large land mass, India has been ruled throughout its history by a series of powerful empires with substantial standing armies. The traditional Indian army, from the ancient period, consisted of four divisions: archers, chariots, infantry and war elephants. Chariots were replaced by mounted cavalry during the Gupta Empire about 400 CE. A full navy first appeared under the Cholas about 1000 CE, and guns were first used in the 15th century CE. The British conquest of India brought a modern, mechanised army to the subcontinent, and its more recent incarnations have fought in world wars.

Early Postclassical Period

Harsha   Harsha, who ruled most of north India in the first half of the 7th century CE, also maintained a large standing army. His plan to conquer central and south India was thwarted with defeat at the hands of the Chalukya ruler Pulakeshin II.

Chola Empire   More impressive military exploits were achieved by the rulers of the Chola Empire (9th-12th c. CE) in south India. After defeating the Cheras, Pallavas and Pandyas, their rivals in south India, Rajaraja Chola turned his armies against other kingdoms in central and north India. His son, Rajendra Chola, then completed the campaign by marching to the heart of north India, crossing the Ganges and entering Bengal. Later, he sailed across the Palk Strait and conquered most of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Perhaps his most outstanding campaign was the naval expedition to southeast Asia, when his army fought and occupied parts of Java, Malaya and Sumatra. The military success of the Cholas relied on the wealth of the capital at Tanjore, which supplied soldiers with sophisticated metal coats of armour and fitted its ships with mounted guns. Another reason was the efficient structure, including a commander-in-chief, three ranks of officers and regiments.

Late Postclassical Period

Delhi Sultanate   The rapid and near-total conquest of India by the Delhi Sultanate emphasises the role of warfare as a factor in shaping Indian history. The military superiority of the Turkic and Afghan armies was considerable. Unlike their Hindu opponents, these soldiers could shoot arrows while riding a horse. It was said that a good horseman could shoot six arrows a minute. Some of them also used a cross bar to launch arrows that could penetrate metal armour. These skills came naturally to the warriors from Central Asia, where (unlike in India) the climate and topography was conducive to horse breeding. Muslim armies also used war-elephants, to batter down fortifications and to scatter soldiers on a battlefield. The sultans owned thousands of these animals, which also became a symbol of royal power. The horse-riding skills of the Sultanate's army also enable them to repel repeated attacks by the Mongols.

Vijayanagar Empire   The rulers of the Vijayanagar Empire (1336-1646 CE), with its capital at Hampi in the Deccan), devoted a large portion of their resources to maintain an army. Some contemporaneous estimates put the numbers at 200, 000 foot soldiers, 24,000 cavalry and 1,200 elephants. For the most part, the army replicated that of their predecessors, although it included a regiment of men with a matchlock , a gun that first appeared in the late 15th century in Europe. The Vijayanagar army incorporated this gun into their arsenal after their battles with the Portuguese, who had arrived on the west coast of India in 1498. Another aspect of Vijayanagar military tactics, shared by all armies of the period, was the use of hill forts.

Reading
Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300* (California, 2004, various editions)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2nd ed.) (Columbia, 1988)
Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)
Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)
Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton, 2009)
Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh, 1969)