INDIAN POLITICAL HISTORY – Ancient Period

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Part I: PREHISTORY

Overview

The political system of prehistoric India is purely a matter of speculation, although some parallels can be drawn from ethnographic research on modern stone-age groups. In general, we can assume that the small number of individuals in any group (estimated between 20-60) did not require any formal system at all. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that some methods of censure, resource distribution and status recognition would have existed. The important point is that these processes would have been informal and flexible.

Questions/discussion

Stone-age societies are usually described as 'tribes.' What is a tribe and how does its political system differ from that of more complex political systems?

Reading

Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century (*Longman, 2008)
Robin Dennell and Martin Porr (eds.), *Southern Asia, Australia, and the Search for Human Origins* (Cambridge, 2014)

Part II: INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Overview

The political system of the Indus Valley civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE), which can only be reconstructed from the (extensive) archaeological record, is still largely a matter of speculation and debate. The key question is the degree of centralisation and possible presence of a ruling elite. Without a successful decipherment of the Indus script, these questions may remain unanswered for a long time.

Theocracy theory

Based on a now-discarded analogy from ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was once assumed that the IVC was a theocracy, with its centre at Mohenjo-Daro or Harappa.   A famous figure of a bearded man was put forward as 'a priest-king', and a large building in Mohenjo-Daro (the 'citadel') was widely accepted as a centre for ritual and state authority. The citadel, however, has recently been identified as a grain storage facility.

Centralisation

Nevertheless, some degree of centralised state organisation linking the wide geographic spread of the IVC is suggested by the uniformity of houses, mud-bricks, weight measures, inscribed seals, grid pattern of streets, street drainage and grain storage. Centralisation is most obvious in the sophisticated drainage system. Houses were

equipped with bathing areas, latrines and sewage drains. Linked to larger mains, which eventually emptied outside the city walls, the sewers would have removed wastewater from the habitation areas and deposited fertile sludge on the surrounding agricultural fields.   On the other hand, the vast territory and rudimentary transport system would have made centralisation difficult to achieve.

<u>Regionalism</u>

Recent research has tended to support the opposite claim: that the IVC political system was dominated by regionalism. New evidence has led to the idea that there were six or seven regional administrative centres, each with links to villages in the hinterland. These regional centres, it is claimed, were the major cities (Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Lothal, Rakhighari, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Rupar), where political and commercial power was concentrated. Each centre operated like a city-state or a complex chieftaincy. Power was shared among various elite kin-groups rather than a hereditary monarchy. And power was gained through trade rather than warfare.

<u>Discussion/questions</u>

1. The evidence for a centralised state in the Indus Valley civilisation is mixed. Analyse the evidence (such as bricks, weights, seals and drainage) to build an argument that uses comparative data from at least one other world civilisation (preferably from the same time period). In conclusion, explain why the issue of state organisation is important not only for an understanding of the Indus Valley civilisation but for later Indian history, as well.

2.   The overwhelming majority of the IVC population lived in small towns and villages, yet most of the archaeological evidence comes from a handful of large urban centres.   Does this discrepancy distort our understanding of the civilisation? Although our first answer might be 'yes,' consider that the villages were connected to the cities by trade networks and possibly political links as well. In addition, most artefacts are found in both urban and rural sites.

<u>Reading</u>

Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)

Romila Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Penguin,2002), pp. 1-97

Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley* (OUP, Karachi, 2010, 2nd ed.)

Part III: INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

<u>Overview</u>

The major development during the early history of the Indo-Aryans was their gradual integration with indigenous peoples. The tribe-based political system of the early Indo-Aryans, rooted in their semi-nomadic pastoralism, evolved into chiefdoms.

<u>Tribes</u>

Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes (*jana*), with a chief (*raja*), who was advised by two different tribal councils (*sabha* and *samiti*). As Indo-Aryan populations moved ever eastward, from the rivers of the Punjab to the plains of north India, particularly the Gangetic region, these semi-nomadic pastoralists mixed with indigenous peoples, producing settled agricultural communities. Although the tribe remained the basis of Indo-Aryan society, power became dependent less on wealth and more on the ability to forge alliances. The most powerful tribes of the ancient period were the Panchala, formed from five independent tribes, and the Kuru, an amalgam of two separate tribes.

<u>Horse-sacrifice</u>

In addition to warfare, the ancient Indo-Aryans also use an elaborate ritual to extend their territory. This was the horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*). If a ruler wished to extend his territory, he performed the ritual by releasing a horse to wander for a year. During that time, anyone could challenge the new territorial claim by attacking the warriors accompanying the wandering horse. If no attack took place, the horse was taken back to the ruler and sacrificed as a consecration of the ruler's new territory.

Chiefdoms

These larger, composite tribes that controlled greater territory were called *janapada*s (lit. 'foothold of a tribe'). We have the names of nearly 40 chiefdoms from early Sanskrit texts. By 800 BCE these Neolithic farming and pastoralist communities combined into yet larger political structures called *maha (*'great'*) janapada*s, or complex chiefdoms. Sixteen of these complex chiefdoms dominated north India in this period, stretching from Taxila, in the northwest to Anga, in the far east. These include Kosala, with its capital at Ayodhya, where Rama of the *Ramayana* ruled; Magadha, with its capital at Pataliputra, later the capital of the Mauryan Empire; Kuru, with its capital at Indraprastha, whose two factions fought the war described in the *Mahabharata*.

Discussion/Questions

1. Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes (*jana*) and later developed chiefdoms (*janapada*), which in turn grew into complex chiefdoms (*mahajanapada*). What are the standard definitions of these political systems: tribe, chiefdom and complex chiefdom? And how does a complex chiefdom differ from a 'state'?

2.   The ritual of the horse-sacrifice has strong parallels in other Indo-European cultures (see the book by B. Lincoln, listed below). Can you think of other ritualised events that promote the power of a political ruler in modern times?

Reading

Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice* (Chicago, 1991)
A.L. Basham*, The Wonder that was India (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)*

David W. Anthony, The Horse the Wheel and Language. How Bronze-   Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World (Princeton, 2007)

Part IV: CLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

During this period (c.500 BCE-500 CE), the existing system of chiefdoms evolved into the first ever centralised empire in India. The Mauryan Empire then fragmented before much of the subcontinent was again united under the Guptas. However, the vast expanse of the Gupta Empire meant that the state was forced to cede power to local rulers, which in turn meant that the centre relied more and more on symbolic power. This was a trend that continued through the medieval and early modern periods.

Mauryan Empire

The long evolution in north India from tribe to chiefdom to state culminated in the establishment of the Mauryan Empire (321- 185 BCE). Its more immediate cause, however, was Alexander's invasion, which stimulated feuding rulers to join together for protection. Chandragupta, founder of the empire, took advantage of the chaos caused by both the Greek incursion in the northwest and the breakdown of smaller kingdoms elsewhere to conquer large swathes of territory, with the exception of south India. The Mauryas defeated a second Greek invasion in the northwest and eventually pushed east, extending their authority to the Bay of Bengal. At its height, the Mauryan state was an efficient bureaucracy with a large civil service. Despite its centralised administration, however, the Mauryan state could not exert control over its extensive territory. Four main provinces were controlled by local princes, while other regions were run by governors and salaried officials. The last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by one of his own generals in 185 BCE.

Pataliputra

The capital of the Mauryan Empire was Pataliputra, one of the great cities of the ancient world. It was built in 489 BCE at the confluence of the Ganges and one of its tributaries, where it served as the capital of the three successive polities: the Magadha chiefdom, the Nanda chiefdom, the Mauryan state and then the Shunga kingdom. At the time of the Mauryas, when its population reached nearly 200,000, the city was a thriving commercial centre and a seat of Buddhist learning. Its beauty and opulence, including palaces and Buddhist stupas, are described by Megasthenes (c. 350-290 BCE), a Greek ambassador who resided in the city for several years (c. 302-298 BCE).

Arthasastra

The rules of Indian statecraft were codified in the *Arthasastra* ('Science of Power'), a Sanskrit treaties composed by Kautilya in about 400 BCE. It appears to describe an idealised state, based largely on the composite chiefdoms that preceded the Mauryan Empire. Not very dissimilar to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, it guides would-be rulers through a murky political world of betrayal, deception, spying and assassination.

Post-Mauryan states

Following the break-up of the Mauryan Empire, a series of smaller but still powerful states ruled north India. The first of these was the Shungas, who retained Pataliputra as their capital and reigned from 185-78 BCE. Next came the Shakas (or Indo-Scythians), a central Asian people who migrated and fought their way into India in the first century CE. Although they controlled large tracts of territory in the north and west, they ruled for only a brief time. Another kingdom with its origins in Central Asia was the Kushana (or Kushan), which ruled Bactria and the surrounding regions (modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) before pushing south into India, where they ruled from about 100-250 CE. The Deccan was ruled by the Satavahanas (c. 200 BCE-230 CE), fighting off two invasions by the Shakas along the way. Less centralised than the Mauryan Empire, the Satavahana state was based on alliances with local rulers. They were also the first Indian kingdom to issue coinage with portraits of their rulers.

Gupta Empire

Most of India was once again unified in a single administration under the Gupta Empire (320-c. 550 CE). Like the Satavahanas, the Gupta rulers used alliances, in the form of dynastic marriages, and warfare to gain control over territory. Chandragupta I (r. 320-335 CE, not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya several centuries earlier) married a princes from the Licchavi clan (in the Himalayan foothills), and his son, Samudragupta (r. 335-385 CE), extended the kingdom to the Deccan by more marriages. The empire was administered by a cadre of officials dispatched to localities to oversee an extensive system of tax-free land grants to Brahmins and merchants. This system permitted local leaders to exercise considerable authority and yet be responsible to the centre. The result was a state in which regional units and diverse communities prospered and cohered in a political whole.

Decentralisation

The Gupta state thus instituted two key features of government that characterised states throughout the medieval period and into the pre-modern period. First, states and localities existed in a balance of power. The authority of the centre was residual in that judicial and police functions were left in the hands of local rulers, guilds and associations. Second, and as a result of this decentralisation, the centre assumed more and more symbolic power and authority.

Kings as gods

Gupta kings became the objects of worship and were treated almost like gods. The beginnings of this royal cult are seen in early Buddhism, where the Buddha is called *chakravartin* (lit. 'Turner of the Wheel'), an epithet for the Sun-god or ideal ruler). The Mauryan ruler Ashoka referred to himself as 'Beloved of the Gods,' while the Kushana kings adopted the title 'Son of God'. Later Gupta rulers portrayed themselves, on coins and in ceremonies, as equal to the gods. In early south India, the paucity of Brahmins meant that kings were the divine representatives on earth and over time became regarded as gods. For example, the Tamil word for 'king's house' came to mean 'temple.'

Questions/Discussion

1. During the Gupta Empire, the images of rulers were depicted on coins in various scenes, killing animals, playing an instrument and performing the horse-sacrifice. What influence did this imagery play in promoting the cult of the ruler?

2. Buddhism gained the patronage of many important rulers during this period, including Asoka. But Buddhism was an other-worldly faith focused on meditation and enlightenment. What compromises did Buddhist kings make in order to maintain power?

Reading

John Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton, 2004)

Romila Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300 (California, 2004, various editions)
F.R. Allchin, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States* (Cambridge, 1995)

A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)