

State and Divine Kingship in Ancient India: Some Case Studies

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In due course of the evolution of mankind, man started living in the groups and later on in self-sufficient villages. These villages later on became towns and then cities. With the bustling trade activities in the large region and across the boundaries, the economic conditions improved resulting into the increase in the power of the chief of the society. The political power of a chief got converted into the power of the ruler making him the king of the state. Even though there are various theories of the origin of state proposed by the ancient and modern scholars, one cannot ignore the natural evolution of a group of people to the state or similar political entity.

The literary references seen in the Vedic and post Vedic literature consider the king as a divine entity. It was believed that the king was made by the God himself. Aitareya Brahmana says that the king was created by Varuna to control all the directions. King's victory in the war was considered as the result of the blessings of Indra. Hence the victorious king started getting the suffixes of the names of Indra. The Smriti and the Puranas have called the king as the God himself. Thus, we see the origin and development of the concept of the divine kingship in the early literature of the country. These concepts were widely spread in India and were also believed by the people. However, this was not enough. The kings themselves were also quite active in imposing these concepts on the minds of their subjects. They adopted various means to fulfil their aim. This paper will take a review of some such but important activities of some kings in ancient India. Further, some facts in the ancient Indian polity will also be highlighted, to which there are no references in the texts.

The historical period of Indian history starts with the life of Mahavira and Gautama Buddha i.e. from the 6th century BCE. However, the material remains are found from the times of Chandragupta Maurya i.e. from the 4th century BCE. The construction of a very impressive palace by Chandragupta was probably his way of imposing his sovereign status on the minds of the contemporary people. This celebrated palace has been found at the site of Kumrahar in Pataliputra i.e. modern Patna. As per the accounts of Megasthenes, who was a Greek ambassador in the court of Chandragupta, the palace reminded him of the palaces of Susa and Persepolis in Persia. It is believed by the scholars that this particular construction by Candragupta Maurya was his proclamation of sovereignty (Hutington 1997: 42). The inscriptions of the times of this ruler have not been found as yet. However, his grandson, Ashoka in 3rd century BCE, has left a number of inscriptions in caves, on rocks, pillars etc. in the text of his inscriptions he specifically calls himself as the beloved of Gods (Talim 2010:3). In fact, this convention was spread far and wide in west Asia. This is seen in the inscriptions of the Persian rulers especially Darius. The king here is verbally saying that he has the divine sanction to rule over his subjects. In fact, for Ashoka, it was more important as he had killed his father and brothers. To convey the people in his empire that his actions and his accession on the throne had divine sanction, he started his inscriptions with the words, "Devanam Priya Priyadasi Raja", i.e. the beloved of the gods, king Piyadasi. In this way, in all the inscriptions of Ashoka, he calls himself by these adjectives and asserts his power both in the material as well as the spiritual form.

The Indo Greek rulers ruled over the north western part of the country in around 2nd -1st centuries BCE. They had a tradition of issuing coins with the images of their Greek and Roman gods. But when they came in Indian territory, they issued coins with the images of Indian gods e.g. on the coins of Agathocles, the images of Balarama and Krishna are shown (Plate 1) and on the coins of

Pantaleon, the image of a deity holding a lotus flower (probably Lakshmi) is depicted (Jha 2003:16) . It appears to be an attempt on the part of the Indo Greek rulers of building their image in the Indian territory. Not only this but the adjectives that these coins carry, also suggest their noble personality e.g. *dhramika* i.e. religious, *soteris* i.e. saviour, *megalou* i.e. great etc. This is clearly an attempt of their image building and showing their divine sanction in the Indian territory where they were considered as the foreign rulers.



(Plate 1)

The Kushanas came from the Central Asian territories. However, when they started ruling over the Indian territories, they devised various methods to build their image in the newly acquired land. This is clearly seen on their coins after the establishment of their empire in North India. Vima Kadphises, the 3rd ruler of the Kushana dynasty was probably a devout Shaiva. He has depicted the image and symbols of and related to Shiva on the reverse side of his coins. (Plate 2). However, on the obverse he has depicted himself as a divine king. Many a times, he is shown with flames coming out of his shoulders. The legend on the reverse says, “Maharajasa Rajadhirajasa Sarvalogasaishwarasa Mahishwarasa Oemo Kataphishasa” (Jha 2003:42). Here he uses a pun in the word Mahishvarasa making it an adjective for himself i.e. the Lord of the earth or Maheshvara i.e. Shiva himself. He probably considered himself one with Shiva. Thus his divine status is suggested through these coins.



Plate-2

The most famous Kushana king Kanishka was the son of Vima Kadphises. In the inscriptions of Kanishka, he calls himself Devaputra Shahanushahi. On his coins, he started depicting various deities of the Greek, Roman, Mesopotemian, Persian and Indian origin, on the reverse side of his coins. This was a suggestion of getting the divine sanction from the god himself. Hence, he called himself with an adjective that would make him the son of God i.e. Devaputra (Jha 2003: 44).

The native rulers of India suggested their divine association through their inscriptions. The famous inscription of Pulumavi at Nashik in Cave no 3 equates his father Gautamiputra Satakarni with many mythical rulers who are mentioned for their valour and divine achievements in the mythology e.g. Rama, Krishna, Arjuna, Bheema, Nabhaga, Nahusha, Janamejaya etc. (Gokhale 2007: 142).

In case of the Gupta rulers, especially Samudragupta, his greatness is emphasised by the description given in the Allahabad pillar inscription and also through the images of goddess Lakshmi holding a lotus flower in her hand. The text of the famous Allahabad Prashasti gives many details of the personality, training and achievements of Samudragupta Goyal 1984 : 21). He is equated with Kubera, Indra, Yama and Varuna, i.e. the guardians of the four directions. His greatness is highlighted in this manner as the king probably wanted the people to believe that it was their good luck that they have a king like him because he also wanted them to forget that there was a king before him named Kachagupta, who was probably the legal heir to the throne of the empire (Jha 2003:47). The memory of Kachagupta was completely erased from the history of the dynasty. In fact, a number of coins of Kachagupta have been discovered from the famous Bayana hoard of the Gupta coins. However, his name is not seen in any of the Gupta genealogy. It was probably due to the help given by the Lichchhavis that the Guptas were so obliged that they had to make their grandson the king of the Gupta empire. Thus, overruling the norms of the texts and the conventions, Samudragupta was made the king of the Gupta dynasty. This clearly indicates that even though there were certain rules and regulations put forward for the making of a king, many a times they were overruled and the convenience preceded over the norms to fulfil their own aspirations.

Another interesting fact about the ancient Indian kingship is that of the joint rule. In case of the Indo Scythian and early Kushana rulers, this practice is seen. The Indo Scythian ruler Vonones had a joint rule with his brother Spalahora for some time and then with his brother's son Spalagadama for some other time (Jha 2003:19). His coins with clear legends explaining their relationship have been found. Further the first Kushana ruler Kujula Kadphises ruled jointly with the Indo Greek ruler Hermaeus. Such coins bear the name of Hermaeus on the obverse and that of Kujula Kadphises on the reverse. Later on, when he established his own kingdom, he issued coins with his sole own name. This fact, of the joint rule or the political alliance so clearly stated on coins, is not reflected in the theoretical part of the texts on the political science (Jha 2003:39).

The theory of the political science does not give any scope to a woman to rule the kingdom independently or there is no scope seen for the regent queen. However there have been a few queens to probably had to look after the whole kingdom and their sons after the death of their husbands. Two such important examples from ancient India can be seen in the Satavahana queen Naganika and the Vakataka queen Prabhavatigupta. Both of these queens had very strong maternal family support. The Satavahana queen Naganika came from the family of the Maharathis who were probably the 1st important empire of Maharashtra after the Mauryas. Hence after the death of her husband Siri Satakani, Queen Naganika not only looked after the kingdom but also issued coins in her own name (Plate no. 3) (Gokhale 2007:303). Similarly the Vakataka queen Prabhavatigupta also looked after the Vakataka kingdom after the death of Rudrasena - II, her husband and the Vakataka ruler of the Nandivardhana branch. Prabhavatigupta came from the powerful Gupta dynasty. Even though she did not issue any coin, a terracotta seal bearing her name has been discovered in the archaeological excavations at Nagardhan in Nagpur district, the report of which is still unpublished. The very fact that Naganika got the statue of her father carved in the Naneghat statue gallery of the Satavahana family, shows her position and power in the family. Prabhavatigupta's Pune copper plate inscription gives the information about the genealogy of the Gupta family rather than the Vakataka family, again

shows the power and status of Prabhavatigupta. Unfortunately, there is no provision made by the authors of the theoretical texts for such regent queens.



Plate-3

The theoretical texts talk about the dynastic rule where the king is the ruler and his duties and rights etc are described. However, during the post Mauryan to pre Gupta period in North India, there existed many Ganarajyas (republics) and city states. The sources to understand the ancient Indian history inform that there were Ganarajyas (Republics), Nagararajyas (City States) and Samrajyas (Empires) in ancient India. Not all states had the dynastic rule. The Numismatic and Epigraphical sources reveal a lot of information about the political conditions in ancient India (Gupta 2004:43). The Ganarajyas or the republican states have their origin in the most ancient systems of the selection of the king by some wise men in the community. Here the primary positions of power are not inherited but were elected. The Buddhist and Jaina texts tell us about the existence of the republics in ancient India. Further their coins have also been found in their territories like Punjab, North Eastern and Eastern Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, especially the present Malwa region. The overall coinage of this period i.e. from 2nd century BCE to the 4th century CE can be divided into three types apart from the coins of the monarchical states, 1) Coins referring to Janapada e.g. Rajanya Janapada but there are some coins where the name of the tribe as well as the tribal chiefs are also mentioned e.g. Rajnyah Kolutasya Veerayashasya, 2) coins of the Gana or the republican tribes where the name of the republican state is mentioned e.g. Yaudheya Ganasya Jayah and 3) coins of the city *nigamas* or city states e.g. Vedisa or Kosambi. It is believed that with the collapse of the imperial authority of the Mauryas the regional authorities and the main trade centres took upon themselves the initiative of striking their own coinages for the purpose of local transactions. These city issues are generally made of copper or some alloy of it. Both square and rectangular shaped coins are known. They carry the name of their city on the coins along with some symbols like an animal or a deity or some symbols. The cities that issued their coins were Varanasi, Kaushambi, Mahishmati, Ujjaini, Vidisha, Tripuri, Tagara, Bhadravati etc.

Thus it can be easily seen that when the normative texts about the polity in ancient India had suggested various norms for the state and statecraft, they had not touched upon the vast variety of the types of polities that were present in ancient India. The numerous possibilities of combinations and influences that were implemented to maintain the kingship are not reflected in the texts of the state

and kingship. Even though the divine sanction of kingship was reiterated through various texts, it was not enough for the people to believe in them. Hence the kings also had to take extra efforts to convey this divine sanction through various activities. Further the theories that were discussed in the texts on the polity were not more than the actual practices in the state. Numerous adjustments were made to maintain the power. Thus, it can be seen that the theories were seldom practised, especially in the domain of ancient Indian polity.

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