

Politics and polity in early Central Himalayan region

DEV KUMAR JHANJH

Azim Premji University, India

The region of the Central Himalayas is divided into the four parallel zones of Tarai-Bhabhar, the Lesser Himalayas, the Greater Himalayas, and the Trans-Himalayas. Geographically, it spreads over an area of around 54,000 square kilometers. Spatially, it is divided into two subdivisions – Garhwal and Kumaon (both in Uttarakhand state). Garhwal is made up of Chamoli, Dehradun, Pauri, Tehri, and Uttarkashi districts, and the area of Kumaon includes the districts of Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat, Nainital, Pithoragarh, and Udham Singh Nagar.

The earliest human presence in this area can be traced to prehistoric times. The subsequent period witnessed the copper hoard culture (latter half of the second millennium BCE), Painted Gray Ware (ca. 1200–600 BCE), and Northern Black Polished Ware (ca. 600–200 BCE). Although the region saw human activity from these earlier periods, the evidence reveals very little about political structures during the greater part of the first millennium BCE. Even in the third century BCE, when Aśoka had fourteen rock edicts inscribed at Kalsi in Dehra Dun, any definite local political authority is not found. The Kuṇindas are the first regional political entity, from around the first century BCE.

For the sake of convenience, the early history of this region can be divided into four phases. The pre-Kuṇinda entities prior to the first century BCE (first phase) can be considered as non-state polities. The rise of the Kuṇindas (ca. first century BCE to first century CE), the Almora chiefs (ca. first to third century CE), and the Yaudheyas (ca. second/third centuries CE) can be regarded as emerging chiefdoms (second phase). The third phase can be identified with the appearance of local

powers, including the Pauravas (ca. fifth to seventh centuries CE), as early monarchical states/kingdoms in different pockets of the Central Himalaya range. The fourth phase is marked by the consolidation of state power under the Devas (“Katyuris”) in ca. eighth to tenth centuries CE.

Numismatic evidence throws considerable light on the non-monarchical polities of the Kuṇindas, Almora chiefs, and Yaudheyas, and their relative impact on the pre-state scenario of early historic times. Kuṇinda coins (*see also* PUNCHMARKED COINS AND TRIBAL COINS, NORTH INDIA) clearly show the influence which they derived from monarchical powers like the Indo-Greeks and further demonstrate their “love for local autonomy” and urge toward monarchy. The Almora coins are so named due to their restricted provenance. It is believed that the arrival of the KUSHANAS forced the Kuṇindas to move from the plains back to the hills. It is in this phase we find Almora coins bearing the names of Śivadatta, Haradatta, Panadatta, Mrghabhūti, and Śivapālita. The symbols depicted on Almora coins indicate their Śaivite affiliation which is supported by the mention of some rulers’ appellations. Yaudheya coins depicting a six-headed Kārttikeya figure have been unearthed in Uttar Pradesh and Dehra Dun. They are depicted as worshippers of Kārttikeya because of their warrior status, which is evident from their group name – *Yaudheya*. A gradual penetration of Brahmanical tradition in this region is further corroborated by the discoveries of an Aśvamedha (horse sacrifice ritual) brick altar inscription (ca. second/third century CE) from Jagatgram (not far from Kalsi where Aśoka had his rock edicts inscribed). On the basis of the coins recovered from this region, Joshi (1989) argued for the active participation of the Kuṇindas, Kushanas, and Yaudheyas in the trade networks extending from Pāṭaliputra to Taxila. Therefore, trade might have played a crucial role as a resource base of the state in this hilly area.

Samudragupta, the great Gupta monarch (see GUPTAS), mentions the ruler of Kartṛpura, which has been identified with Kārttikeyapura of the Kumaon area, as a frontier chief (*pratyantānṛpati*) by the mid-fourth century CE. That the contemporary ruler of the neighboring mountainous region also gained the same type of status is evident from the Lakhamandal inscription which provides titles like *narapati* (lord of the people), *nṛpati* (the lordship of king), and *kṣipati* (the strength of the arms of the ruler). These titles sound more like epithets associated with a nascent monarchy, while *mahārāja* (great king) and *mahārājādhirāja* (the king of the great kings), among others, are actual political epithets, typical of a well-entrenched monarchical polity.

Two Talesvara records introduce us to an entrenched monarchical polity of the Pauravas (ca. fifth to seventh centuries CE) in the Central Himalayas. These two records present Dyutivarman and his son Viṣṇuvarman as the rulers of a hill kingdom (*parvatākara rājya*) with the political epithet of *paramabhaṭṭāraka mahārājādhirāja* (paramount authority). This epithet clearly signifies the sovereign status of these rulers. This may further be corroborated by the absence of the Gupta era in their records. Besides providing information on actual records of succession, their genealogy is traced from three origins (*candra*, *sūrya*, and *paurava*). The combination of these three as the origins of a dynasty cannot be seen anywhere else in early India. These are salient features of a monarchical polity. By addressing all governmental and nongovernmental officials, Dyutivarman made them witnesses to his reissued grant when the original record was burnt. The mention of the temple authority, administrative officers, and Gauggalikas (a community that collected/traded in *guggulu* or gum resin) may be seen as an attempt to accommodate them within the newly emerged state system. The reissue of a grant on the basis of an earlier document therefore speaks of a well-maintained record-keeping system in the

state and signals the emergence of a complex society in which specific documentation of the land was required to avoid any conflict on land ownership.

The donation of lands to individuals and institutions was a widespread method for gaining legitimacy for a newly emerged kingdom in early India. Following that norm, Dyutivarman donated lands for the temples of Viraṇeśvarasvāmī (a form of Viṣṇu) and Viṣṇuvarman for Vāmanasvāmī (Vāmana incarnation of Viṣṇu) in Brahmapura-Kārttikeyapura. The donation of lands certainly indicates the agricultural expansion of the state.

It seems that agricultural production intensified during Viṣṇuvarman's reign. The increase in twenty-three *kṣetra* (agricultural lands) in Viṣṇuvarman's time supports this assumption. Reference to units of measurement (*kulyavāpa*, *khārivāpa*, and *dronavāpa*) indicates the amount of seed the granted lands could consume. It is also interesting to note that, unlike his father Dyutivarman, the plots donated by Viṣṇuvarman were not tax free (*agrahāra*) (see BRAHMADEYA/AGRAHĀRA). This may be due to the paucity of agricultural space in the hilly terrain. However, Viṣṇuvarman rightly understood the importance of the agricultural sector for the state treasury. This led him to expand his authority into the forest area in order to facilitate the spread of agriculture. Further, the importance of forests for various resources is beyond doubt and attempts to include them within state boundaries can be interpreted as the pursuit of an alternative resource base. In this way, the forest area came under the orbit of the state system and experienced a gradual transformation under the influence of Sanskrit culture.

The establishment of a new kingdom, the protection of land from the fear of Kali yuga (a period of time when it is believed that there was an overall moral degradation in society) (see ANCIENT INDIAN ERAS), and the extension of state territory into the forest required a strong military apparatus. The Guptas seemed to have

exerted influence here. Thus, we find important state functionaries – *pramātāra* (civil judge), *pratīhāra* (palace guards), *kumārāmātya* (princely advisor), *pīlupati* (leader/keeper of elephant forces), *aśvapati* (commander of cavalry), *viśayapati* (head of a district), *rājaputraka* (prince and subordinate ruler), *dūtaka* (messenger), *daṇḍoparika*, *kaṭuka*, and *valādhyakṣa* (all connected with punishments) – as well as *jayanapati* (in charge of the armory), *gañjapati* (a treasurer), and *sūpakārapati* (chief cook).

This gives us an idea of the Paurava administration. However, the relation between the ruler and these officers is not clear. The administrative tier of the Paurava state may be surmised in descending order as: *rājya* (kingdom), *pura* (city), *viśaya* (district), *grāma* (village), *pallī* (hamlet), *bhūmi* (small land). The Paurava polity certainly experienced some features of “threshold times” which carry some elements of earlier times and germinate some new features adapted by the Devas in the succeeding period.

With the rise of the Devas (“Katyuris”), the power base shifted from Brahmapura to Kārttikeyapura, which earlier had figured only in the context of donated lands. They used grander titles (such as *paramabhaṭṭāraka*, *mahārājādhirāja*, *parameśvara*, *paramamāheśvara*, *paramabrahmaṇya*) than the Pauravas. The elaborate treatment of epithets, eulogy in the introductory section, and again the succession of genealogy is a marker of consolidated forms of monarchy.

Like the preceding Pauravas, the Devas followed the pattern of donating lands to the deities for the purpose of acquiring legitimacy. However, instead of conventional *agrahāra*, they invented a new term, “*prakṛti-parihāra*,” which may also be interpreted as “rent-free holding” (see *DEVADĀNA*). An interesting change in the religious policy of the Devas can be noted from their donations to different cults. Lalitaśūradeva, a devout worshipper of Śiva, donated in favor of two temples of Nārāyaṇa, and one for Āditya. Donations to different cults

may indicate tolerant attitudes of rulers toward other sects. Besides the private landholders, as in the previous centuries, this period witnessed the rise of community land being donated to deities. Rulers incorporated important personages within the state system by leaving a space for private or community donors.

A close look at the Deva administration reveals a remarkable proliferation of administrative functionaries, including some who were already present in the Paurava state. New functionaries of the Deva administration include *rājas* (chiefs), *rājanakas* (chieftains), *rājāmatyas* (heads of the ministers), and *rājasthānīyas* (chief justices). Titles of the *mahāsāmanta* (great underlord) and *mahāsāmantādhipati* (the head of the *mahāsāmantas*) reflect more powerful status than *sāmanta* (underlord). Titles of a significant number of officers associated with various military activities and punishments, such as *mahādaṇḍanāyakas* (commander of forces or magistrate), *duḥśādhyasādhanikas* (head policeman engaged in tough tasks), *dāśāparādhikas* (officer dealing with the ten offences), *cauroddharaṇikas* (officer responsible for catching the thieves and imposing fines on them), and *hastyaśvoṣṭrabalavyāpṛtakas* (superintendent of infantry, cavalry, camel, and elephant units), highlight the coercive authority of the state. Local subordinate rulers like *mahāmanuṣyas* (landlord) and *āsedhabhaṅgādhikṛtas* (official who had to prevent flight from prison or legal restraint) are also found.

Regarding the administrative tier of the Devas, *viśaya* (district) can be placed at the top, followed by interchangeable *pallī* (hamlet), and *grāma* (village), with *vṛtti* (smaller than village or hamlet) placed at the bottom. Besides the agrarian spread, the non-agrarian sector must have played an important role in economic functioning. The presence of *ābhīras* (a pastoral community), *vaṇīkas* (merchants), and *śreṣṭhis* (merchants par excellence) highlights the possibility of a vibrant non-agrarian

sector of traders. The need for *śaulkikas* (superintendent of tolls), *gaulmikas* (superintendent of woods), and *ghaṭṭapālas* (superintendent of the mountainous passes) was also connected with the generation of resources.

Besides the internal dynamics of the central Himalayan region, connections with other areas contributed to the making of the state society in this region. Many pilgrims coming from distant lands were catalysts in this context. A pattern of interaction between the broader area of the Central Himalayas and north Indian polity is reflected in the archaeological evidence. Traders and pilgrims coming from different areas as early as the third/fourth centuries CE also contributed to the creation of this ambience. Records of pilgrims who came from eastern areas (*pūrva deśa*) were left on temple walls at Jagesvar, Devprayag, and Gopesvar between the eighth and tenth centuries. Administrative officers mentioned in the Paurava and Deva records are also attested in areas of the Ganga Valley and the neighboring areas of Himachal Pradesh. Temple complexes built during the fifth to twelfth centuries in various styles support the theory of an influx of people from different areas. The presence of both the Nāgara and Drāviḍa types of temples side by side in Pandukesvar is not

only unique but also speaks of the existence of people from Peninsular India.

SEE ALSO: Early Western Himalayas; Punchmarked coins and tribal coins, North India.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Agrawala, D. P. and Kharakwal, J. S. (1998) *Central Himalayas: an archaeological, linguistic and cultural synthesis*. New Delhi.
- Atkinson, E. T. ([1881–4] 2002) *The Himalayan gazetteer or the Himalayan districts of the north western province of India*, 3 vols. Allahabad.
- Chanchani, N. (2019) *Mountain temples and temple mountains: architecture, religion, and nature in the Central Himalayas*. Seattle.
- Gupte, Y. R. (1915–16) “Two Talesvara copperplate.” *Epigraphia Indica* 13: 109–21.
- Joshi, M. P. (1989) *Morphogenesis of Kuṇindas (cir. 200 BC–cir. AD 300): a numismatic overview*. Almora.
- Kielhorn, F. (1896) “Pandukesvar plate of Lalitauradeva (Year 21).” *Indian Antiquary* 25, July: 177–84.
- Sharma, D. D. (2009) *Cultural history of Uttarakhand*. New Delhi.
- Sircar, D. C. (1955–6) “Three plates from Pandukesvar.” *Epigraphia Indica* 31: 277–98.

