

UNIT 8 NATURE OF REGIONAL POLITICS

Structure

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to explain the :

- contents of polity,
- major political developments in different regions of the Indian sub-continent such as Northern and Eastern India, Western and Central India, the Deccan and Southern India,
- links between the developments in Western and Central Asia on the one hand and those of the Indian sub-continent on the other, and
- principal reconstructions of Indian polity between eighth and thirteenth centuries.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit seeks to define the essential components of Indian polity through major political developments. The sub-continent has been divided into various regions for the purpose. There has also been an effort to mark the impact of certain developments across the north-western borders (in West and Central Asia) on the Indian political scene. Finally, the major thrust of the Unit is on understanding the nature of regional politics, i.e. to deal with the question of characterizing form/s of polity in India.

The study of polity calls for analysis of the nature, organisation and distribution of power. Political set-ups differed from region to region due to different economic and geographical potentialities of the regions. In India, the period between eighth and thirteenth centuries was very significant not only from the point of view of economic formations (see Block-1) but also from the point of view of political processes. Indeed, the two are interlinked. The nature of polity during the centuries under discussion may be better understood in the context of major political developments in different regions of the Indian sub-continent.

8.2 MAJOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Broadly, important regions requiring detailed investigation can be identified as northern, eastern, central, western and southern India. In addition, the Deccan also constituted as a substantial political power base.

8.2.1 Northern and Eastern India

In this section we discuss the major areas of Northern and Eastern India.

i) KASHMIR

Kashmir was mainly occupied with the internal political developments but on some occasions it was also involved in the politics of Northern India. It was ruled by the Karkota, Utopala and two Lohar dynasties. Muktapida, also known as Latitaditya, conquered a part of Kanauj and annexed some parts of Tibet. Many irrigation works were undertaken by some rulers of the Karkota family. Embankments and dams were built on the main rivers which brought a large area of the valley under cultivation. However, the tenth century saw the emergence of a new development in Kashmir politics. Military ambitions of rulers and emergence of mercenary warriors made the common man miserable and political conditions unstable. There were at least twenty kings between c. 1000 and 1300 A.D. Very often they became tools in the hands of powerful priests and no less powerful landlords such as the **damaras**. There were conflicts **amongst** priests and **damaras** too. Queen Didda, and kings such as Samgramaraya, Kalash, Harsha, Jayasimha and Sinhadeva were involved in the politics of these centuries in Kashmir.

ii) GANGA VALLEY, KANAUJ

In the Ganga Valley, Kanauj became the centre of gravity due to its strategic and geographical potentiality. It was located in the middle of the doab which was easily fortifiable. The control over Kanauj implied control over the eastern and western parts of the Ganga doab which was very fertile. It was also interconnected with the land and water routes. It was, therefore, not surprising that the three leading contemporary powers such as the Palas, the Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas clashed over the possession of Kanauj. The Palas were primarily centered in the Eastern India, the Pratiharas in the Western India and the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan. But all the three powers tried to control the Ganga plains, especially Kanauj. The political boundaries of the three empires kept shifting from time to time.

iii) BIHAR AND BENGAL

The political basis of the Palas was the fertile land of Bihar and Bengal and external trade relations, especially with the South-east Asia. The founder of the dynasty, Gopal, had been responsible for taking Bengal out of chaos in the early eighth century. Before him **matsyanyaya**, i.e. law of fishes prevailed in Bengal and political instability was very marked. Dharmapala led a successful campaign against Kanauj but could not control it for a long time. The failure to maintain control over Kanauj forced the Pala rulers to extend their influence towards the further east. Devapala brought Pragjyotishpur (Assam) under the influence of Palas, and Nepal also accepted the dominance of the Palas. After Devapala, the Pala power was not very effective in the North Indian politics, though the dynasty continued till the early thirteenth century. The polity of the Palas was within the framework of the monarchical set-up and in this private and the state interests developed simultaneously. The empire consisted of areas administered directly and areas administered by the vassal chiefs. Ramapala, the last important sovereign of the Pala dynasty who ruled from c. 1080 to 1122 A.D., is known to have organised a control of **uparika** and districts (**visaya**) called **samantha-chakra** (circle of vassal chiefs). His reign is also marked by a peasant rebellion of **Kaivarttas**.

iv) ASSAM

Towards the further east, Assam was in the process of transition towards the state polity during the centuries under survey. Assam consists of two river valleys, viz., those of the Brahmaputra and Surama. By seventh century the Varmans had established their ascendancy and brought about territorial and political integration of the Brahmaputra valley into Kamasupa. The Varmans made land grants to the **brahmanas** who in turn extended the scope of cultivable land and brought the tribal people in the network of state system. The Varman rulers constructed many embankments thereby giving stimulus to wet rice cultivation. Shalastambha kings in Pragjyotishi continued the practice of the Varmans in the eighth and ninth centuries and made many land grants to **brahmanas** and religious institutions. Later, Palas also continued this trend. The medieval Assam inscriptions refer to terms like **raja**, **rajni**, **rajaputra**, **rajanyaka** and **ranaka** who appear to have been landed intermediaries.

In Orissa a number of small kingdoms and principalities appeared along the coast of Bay of Bengal and in the hilly hinterland. Kalinga, Kongoda, Dakshina Tosali and Uttara Tosali were situated at the Bay of Bengal and Dakshina Kosala in the upper Mahanadi valley. The borders of the different kingdoms varied from time to time but the topography of their centres and their spatial distribution remained almost unchanged from the sixth to twelfth centuries. The kings donated lands to **brahmanas** who performed various administrative and ritualistic functions. Land



grants were also made to religious institutions. The rice cultivation in the fertile riverine nuclear areas and trade links, both internal and external, gave stimulus to the state system of different kingdoms. Chiefs belonging to the Samavamsa ruled initially in western Orissa and gradually extended their sway over a large part of Orissa. After the fall of the Sulkis, the Bhaumakaras seem to have divided Kodalaka-mandal (Dhenkanal district) under the rule of two feudatory families, viz., the Tungas and Nandas. The Bhanjas are known to us from about fifty inscriptions. The dynasty had various branches. Mayurbhanja, Keonjhar, Bandh, Sonepur and Gumsur regions of Orissa comprised the territories of different Bhanja families. The Gangas in the twelfth century constructed many temples including the famous Sun temple at Konarka, to consolidate their hold over tribal areas.

8.2.2 Western and Central India

Western India, especially Gujarat and Malwa, was under the influence of the Gurjara Pratiharas. Malwa was very fertile and Gujarat was a part of internal and external trade network. The Pratiharas resisted incursions of the Arabs and were also drawn into North Indian politics. The lure of Kanauj was too great. Bhoja, the greatest Pratihara ruler controlled Kanauj and it was a part of his empire for sometime. Later, Gujarat was lost to Rashtrakutas thereby adversely affecting the economic base of the Pratihara empire. However, Bhoja's successor Mahendrapal not only maintained intact the vast empire inherited by him, but also further expanded it towards the east. No less than seven of his records have been found in south Bihar and north Bengal.

The post tenth century scene in Central and Western India saw the rise of numerous powers, who claimed to be Rajputs and many of whom were feudatories of the Gurjara Pratiharas. The emergence of these Rajput families is linked up with increase in land grants and consequent new land relationships. They were also the products of fusion of foreign and local elements, and some segmentation of a few clans. Amongst these newly emergent powers in Central and Western India one can include the Chandellas in Khajuraho, the Chauhans in Ajmer, the Paramaras in Malwa, the Kalachuris in Tripuri (near Jabalpur), the Chaulukyas in Gujarat, the Guhilas in Mewar and the Tomaras with their headquarters in modern Delhi. The different Rajput clans constructed their fortresses on a large-scale which represented the numerous foci of power. Certain amount of inter-clan marriages amongst some of these Rajput families led to wider areas of social and political activity.

The political developments in North, Western and Central India were considerably influenced by the changes taking places in the contemporary West and Central Asia. The coming of the Arabs (seventh-eighth centuries), first as traders and later as invaders, had already made substantial impact in India. The Gurjara Pratiharas, Palas and the Rashtrakutas had to deal with this challenge in economic and political spheres.

The Samanids ruled over Trans-Oxiana, Khurasan and parts of Iran in the ninth century. Among the Samanid governors was a Turkish slave, Alaptigin, who later established an independent kingdom with its capital at Ghazni. After sometime Mahmud (998-1030 A.D.) ascended the throne at Ghazni and brought Punjab and Multan under his control. Mahmud undertook many raids and plundered many temples in India known for their wealth, largely to consolidate his own position in Central Asia. Another house that penetrated India was that Bhur in North-west Afghanistan. Shahabuddin Muhammed (1173-1206 A.D.) of this house conquered Multan, Uchch, Lahore; created a base in Punjab and finally defeated the Chauhan ruler Prithviraj in the second battle of Tarain in 1192. He also defeated Jaichandra of the Gahadaval dynasty (Kanauj based) in the battle of Chandwar in 1194. Such attempts of Central Asian chiefs finally led to the establishment of the Turkish empire in North India in the early thirteenth century under the Mamluk Sultans such as Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Outline, in about 15 lines, the major political developments in Northern India.

2) Discuss in about 10 lines the political history of Western and Central India.

3) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (✕) ?

- i) Kanauj, in the Ganga Valley became prominent due to its strategic and geographical potentiality.
- ii) The Rashtrakutas were primarily centred in Eastern India.
- iii) The Varman rulers of Assam gave impetus to the construction of irrigational works.
- iv) The famous Sun Temple at Konark was constructed in the twelfth century.

8.2.3 The Deccan

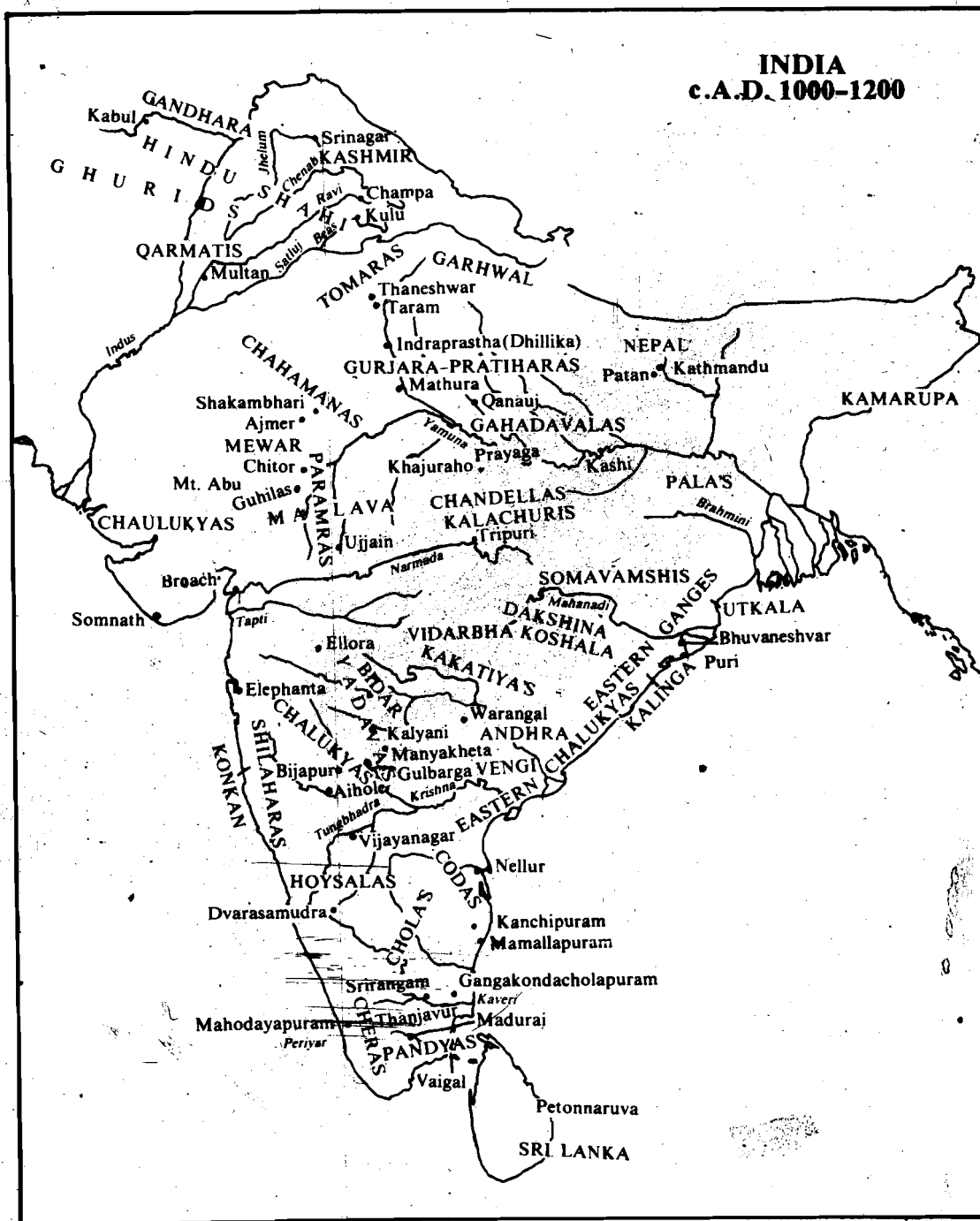
The Deccan also known as the bridge between North and South India was under the control of the Rashtrakutas from the early eighth century. They contended with the Gurjara Pratiharas over the control of Gujarat and Malwa and tried their fortunes in the Ganga Valley. Nor did they let powers in the eastern Deccan and southern India live in peace. The eastern Chalukyas at Vengi (in modern Andhra Pradesh), the Yadavas and Pandyas in Kanchi and Madurai respectively (in Tamil Nadu) also had to bear their wrath.

Dhruva (c. 780-93 A.D.), Amoghavarsha — and Krishna II (c. 814-914 A.D.) were important scions of the Rashtrakutas. Some other powers of the Deccan were the Chalukyas of Kalyana, the Yadavas (Seunas) of Devagiri and the Kakatiyas of Warangal.

8.2.4 Southern India

The southern India broadly covers the portion of the peninsula which lies south of 13° Northern latitude and between the Malabar and Coromandel coasts. It also

comprised modern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, southern Karnataka and southern Andhra Pradesh. The Coromandal (from cholamandalam) plain extending from the tip of the peninsula to the northern edge of the broad delta of the Godavari and Krishna rivers was the major core region of the South India. Tamil plain's northern most part was Tondaimandalam and Pandimandalam was the southernmost portion of the peninsula. The malabar coast was significant due to the potentialities of sea-trade. The Coromandel coast too had a number of entrepôts such as Kaveripatnam, Pondicherry, Masulipatam etc. These geographical configurations greatly influenced the political structure of the South India.



Map-1 India c. 1000-1200 A.D.

By mid eighth century the erstwhile powerful kindgoms of the Pallavas and Chalukyas were spent forces. However, their legacies were inherited by their political successors, viz., the Cholas and the Rashtrakutas respectively. Also, the political law of a tussle between the power based in the Kaveri Valley and that of Karnataka became a concrete course for many centuries. This was the case of not only the relations between the Rashtrakutas and the Pallavas in the late eighth and early ninth centuries but also of the strained ties between the Rashtrakutas and the Cholas, when the later succeeded the Pallavas. Western Chalukyas, the political successors of the Rashtrakutas, continued the trend and were often at loggerheads with the Cholas from the early eleventh century. Very often the small chiefdoms of the Deccan such as those of the Nolambas, Vaidumbas, Banas, etc. became victims of these big power rivalries. Vengi (coastal Andhra Pradesh) was also an important bone of contention amongst these powers.

The post tenth century scene in the south is also marked by three important phenomena:

- i) internecine wars amongst the Cholas, Pandyas and the Cheras,
- ii) involvement of Sri Lanka, and
- iii) expansion of Indian influence beyond the seas—particularly in the South-east Asia. This climaxed in the naval expedition in the times of the Chola King Rajendra-I (first half of the eleventh century).

The Cholas under Rajendra-I had also reached up to the Ganga Valley—a venture immortalised in the great temple at Gangaikondacholapuram (north east of Thanjavur).

8.3 RECONSTRUCTIONS OF INDIAN POLITY BETWEEN 8TH AND 13TH CENTURIES

The writings on this subject since the early 1960s have broadly followed three approaches, viz., emphasizing feudal, segmentary and integrative character of polity (See also Block 9 of EH1-02)

8.3.1 Feudal Polity

(See also Unit 1.7) R.S. Sharma expounded this view in his book **Indian Feudalism** published in 1965. It is based on the pan-Indian character (See also Unit 1.2.1) of land grants. It focuses on :

- a) administrative structure based on the control and possession of land,
- b) fragmentation of political authority,
- c) hierarchy of landed intermediaries,
- d) dependence of peasants on landlords,
- e) oppression and immobility of peasants, and
- f) restricted use of metal money (See also Unit 3.3.1 and 3.4.2)

The degree of the dependence of the peasants on landlords might differ from region to region. However, the development of agriculture, handicrafts, commodity production, trade and commerce and of urbanisation (See also Block-1) could create conditions for differentiation in the ranks of the peasantry. Hierarchical control over land was created by sub-infeudation in certain areas, which gave rise to graded types of landlords.

Recently the validity of the feudal formation in the context of medieval India has been questioned. It has been suggested that the medieval society was characterised by self-dependent or free peasant production. The peasants had control over the means and the processes of production. It is added that there was relative stability in social and economic structure and there was not much change at the level of techniques of agricultural production. The conflicts were over the distribution and redistribution of the surplus than over a redistribution of means of production. The appropriation of agrarian surplus to the state formed the chief instrument of exploitation. The high fertility of land and the low subsistence level of the peasant facilitated the state appropriation of the surplus in conditions of relative stability. This line of approach

does not take note of superior rights and inferior rights of one party or another over land. In fact in early medieval times in the same piece of land the peasant held inferior rights and the landlords held superior rights. The land grants clearly made the position of landlords stronger over the land as compared to that of peasants. The critique of feudal polity unfortunately does not take note of massive evidence in support of the subjection and immobility of peasantry, which is an indispensable element in feudal system. Also, this critique is a disguised attempt to reinforce the colonialist view of stagnating and unchanging Indian society.

8.3.2 Segmentary State

An attempt has been made to view the medieval polity, particularly that of the medieval South India, in terms of segmentary state. The segmentary state is understood as one in which the spheres of ritual suzerainty and political sovereignty do not coincide. The ritual suzerainty extends widely towards a flexible, changing periphery and the political sovereignty is confined to the central core area. In segmentary state there exist several levels of subordinate foci, organised pyramidally beyond a royal centre. From the primary centre of the ruling dynasty kings unified their subordinate centres ideologically. In the state segments actual political control was exercised by local elite. It is also assumed that there existed close co-operation between **brahmanas** and dominant peasants. However, the segmentary state formulation has some limitations. Ritual suzerainty is confused with cultural suzerainty. It also relegates the different foci of power to the periphery and does not see them as components of the state power. Moreover, the heterogeneous character of South Indian peasantry is not adequately understood. In so far as the notion of segmentary state subordinates political and economic dimensions of the State structure to its ritual dimensions, it does not inspire much confidence. The notion has been applied to the Rajput polity as well. **Aidan Southall** and **Burton Stein** are major exponents of this view.

8.3.3 Integrative Polity

This formation has been worked out by **B. D. Chattopadhyaya**. The study of political process calls for consideration of the presence of established norms and nuclei of state system, horizontal spread of state system implying transformation of pre-state polities into state polities and integration of local polities into a structure that went beyond the bounds of local polities. The proliferation of ruling lineages (ruling families) is seen as social mobility process in early medieval India. The diffused foci of power are represented by what is broadly called as the **samanta** system. The **samanta** were integrated into the structure of polity in which the overlord-subordinate relation came to be dominant over other levels of relation in the structure. The transformation of the **samanta** into a vital component of the political structure is itself an evidence of ranking and in turn clarifies the political basis of integration. Rank as the basis of political organisation implies differential access to the centre as also shifts within the system of ranking. It is also assumed that the rank as the basis of political organisation generated crisis between the rankholders and also between them and the overlord. This emphasis on ranking brings the integrative polity formulation closer to the notion of segmentary state.

The integrative polity, like the feudal polity, sees political processes in terms of parallels with contemporary economic, social and religious developments, such as:

- i) horizontal spread of rural agrarian settlements (See also Unit 1.2),
- ii) horizontal spread of the dominant ideology of social order based on **varna** division (See also Unit 2.1 and 2.3), and
- iii) integration of local cults, rituals and sacred centres into a larger structure (See also Unit 2.3).

However, this formulation suffers from definitional vagueness. The terms "lineage domain" and "state society" are not clarified. Further, the **samantas** even in their trans-political sense remained a landed aristocracy. More importantly, neither the segmentary state nor the integrative polity models provide alternative material bases which could be contrasted with that of the feudal polity. Both integration and segmentation can be explained in terms of land grants which formed the crucial element in the feudal structure. In as much as local landlords of chieftains derived their fiscal and administrative powers from the King (the overlord), paid tributes and

performed military and administrative obligations towards him, they worked for integration. On the other hand, when they ruled over the local peasants in an autonomous manner it amounted to the segmentation of authority. "Lineage geography" which is crucial for the reconstruction in terms of integrative polity, is not available on pan-India scale. Except in the case of the Chauhans and Paramaras, 'lineage' did not play an important part in the organisation of polity. Even ranks were formed on the basis of unequal distribution of land and its revenue resources. Similarly, the distinction between political and ritual suzerainty coupled with their association with the core and the periphery respectively, which is considered the cornerstone of the concept of the segmentary state suffers from the absence of empirical data from many important regions of the Indian sub-continent. On the contrary, the reconstruction of medieval Indian polity in terms of feudalism relies on such elements which can be applied to practically the whole of India.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Outline the political developments in the Deccan and South India. Answer in about 15 lines.

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- 2) Write a note on the concept of Feudal Polity. Answer in about ten lines.

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- 3) What do you understand by the term Segmentary State? Explain in about 10 lines.

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8.4 LET US SUM UP

The geographical configurations, the economic structure and ideological apparatus greatly conditioned the nature of polity from region to region in India between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.

- In Kashmir the powerful landowning social groups—particularly priests and **damaras** influenced the internal politics.
- Ganga Valley and Kanauj were an important bone of contention till at least mid-ninth century. Three important powers of North and West India as well as that of the Deccan, viz., the Palas, Gurjara Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas were actively involved in this.
- Assam was undergoing the processes of transition from tribal polity to state polity and was getting linked up with Northern India.
- In Orissa too, the state was emerging with strong tribal elements.
- In Western and Central India there was phenomenal increase in Rajput families most of whom were feudatories of the Gurjara Pratiharas.
- Developments in West and Central Asia had considerable impact on the Indian political scene. From the days of the arrival of the Arabs as traders in the seventh century to the establishment of the Turkish empire in the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Indian sub-continent remained an important target of external forces.
- In the Deccan and the South the tussle between the Karnataka based powers and those in the Kaveri Valley was a recurring theme. Equally persistent was the lure of the coastal Andhra Pradesh (Vengi). Wars amongst the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras and occasional involvement of Sri Lanka in these encounters are other important features of the political scene in the region. Also, the Chola kings made successful efforts to reach beyond the seas—as far as the South-east Asia.
- The reconstructions of medieval Indian political structure have broadly followed three lines of enquiry—feudal polity, segmentary state and integrative polity. While the latter two seem to have limited and localised applicability, they have not been able to rationalize the concepts in terms of alternative material bases. Their reliance on the essential elements of mode of production of the 'feudal model' coupled with latter's applicability on almost pan-Indian scale make R.S. Sharma's contention more acceptable in the present state of research. Indeed, polity of different regions is still to be analysed separately and there is a need to establish empirically the relationship amongst different regions of the Indian sub-continent.

8.5 KEY WORDS

Damaras	: Powerful landlords in Kashmir
Mandal	: An administrative division
Matsya-nyaya	: Law of the fishes—state of chaos
Rajanyaka	: Landed intermediary and an official
Renaka	: Landed intermediary and an official
Samanta Chakra	: Circle of Vassal Chiefs

8.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should include the political developments in Kashmir and Ganga Valley. See Sub-sec. 8.2.1
- 2) See Sub-sec. 8.2.2
- 3) i) ✓ ii) ✗ iii) ✓ iv) ✓

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should include the political history of Rashtrakutas, Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras. See Sub-secs. 8.2.3 and 8.2.4
- 2) See Sub-sec. 8.3.1
- 3) Distinction between ritual and political sovereignty. Base your answer on Sub-sec. 8.3.2