
UNIT 9 NORTHERN AND EASTERN INDIA

Structure

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

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

- areas included in Northern and Eastern India.
- real nature of kingship,
- distribution of administrative and fiscal power,
- emergence of multi-centered power structure,
- role of vassals and state officials,
- changes in the bureaucratic set up, in the light of land distribution,
- power hierarchy of samantas and functions of samantas,
- influence of clan on landholdings,
- inter-vassal relationship, and
- ideological base of political authority.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding Unit (No. 8) had attempted to introduce you to a theoretical debate on the nature of political organisation in the Indian sub-continent between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. The present Unit, however, is a specific case study of North and East India. The overall reconstruction has been done within the framework of what has been described as feudal polity. The Unit seeks to show the limits of the so called centralised monarchies and the real nature of new royalty. We will discuss the pattern of landholdings, the distribution of administrative and fiscal powers and the transfer of judicial and policing rights. We will also analyse the emergence of a new type of bureaucracy, the hierarchy of samantas and the multifarious functions of samantas and other officials. All these are indicators of the rise of multi-centered power structure in the region under discussion. The Unit also seeks to highlight the ideological base of this structure.

9.2 THE REGION DEFINED

Writings since the early 1950s have opened up great many issues bearing on the political structure of Northern and Eastern India. It was a product of a set of changes at all levels and in all spheres. The pace of these changes was determined by the mechanism of land grants (see also Block-1). Broadly, the understanding of centuries and the regions under discussion in terms of feudalism have been the most dominating strain of recent historical writings on the political set up.

How does one define Northern and Eastern India? Generally, territories north of the Vindhyas and up to the Himalayan *tarai* are included. However, modern states comprising Gujarat, Rajasthan and most of Madhya Pradesh are being excluded from this discussion, for, they have been taken as constituting Western and Central India (See also Unit-10). Thus, Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh make up Northern India while the Eastern India comprises Bihar, Bengal (including present day Bangladesh), Orissa and Assam as well as other states of the Brahmaputra Valley. Important political powers of these regions have already been identified in Unit-8.

9.3 DISPERSAL OF POWERS : THE NEW ROYALTY

Early medieval Indian kings are known to have used very high sounding and pompous titles, such as **paramabhattaraka**, **maharajadhiraja**, **parameshvara**, etc. This has very often formed the basis of seeing these kings as very powerful centralised monarchs. However, this is not true. The evidence relating to the territorial divisions and distribution of administrative and fiscal powers shows the real wielders of power. The growing bardic sycophancy had begun to create an aura around kings, treating them as rulers of rulers and ascribing divinity to them. As a result of this image building the King was increasingly becoming more of a private person than the real head of the state. It was not a centralised power structure but a multi-centered system of power.

9.3.1 Growth of Administrative Units

The overall political structure is marked by dispersal of political and economic powers. The epigraphic evidences refer to **bhuktis**, **mandalas**, **vishayas**, etc. The Palas had, for instance, under them **Pundravardhana-bhukti**, **Vardhamana-bhukti**, **Dardabhukti**, **Tira-bhukti**, etc. **Mandalas** were widespread in Bengal but not so frequent in Bihar. Pala inscriptions also refer to **nayas** or **vithis** and **khandala** as some sort of administrative units.

A twelfth century copper plate grant of Vaidyadeva from Assam mentions **bhukti**, **mandala** and **vishya**. In Orissa too **vishayas** and **mandalas** assigned as fiefs to royal scions are mentioned in records of the twelfth century. **Pattalas** and **pathakas** were administrative units under the Gahadavalas.

The literary sources of the period are also eloquent about many of the aforesaid administrative units. Harishena's **Kathakosha**, a work of the tenth century, refers to a **vishaya** in the sense of the principality of a King who has a **samanta** under him. **Rajatarangini**, the chronicle of Kashmir, distinguishes between **Svamandal** and **mandalantar**, which suggests that kings in Kashmir exercised direct administrative control mostly over their own **mandalas** while other **mandalas** were governed by **samantas** with an obligation to pay tribute and a commitment of allegiance. At the lowest level perhaps villages also may have acquired a lord either by land grants placing villages under **samanta** chiefs or by forceful occupation or by the submission of individuals. There is a reference to **qulma** as consisting of three to five villages. Further, allusions to **gramapati**, **gramadhipati**, **dashagfamapati**, **vimshatimsha-gramapati**, **sahasragramapati** indicate a hierarchy of villages. The mode and quantum of payment to village heads are also specified. **Dashasha** (head of ten villages) got as much land as he could cultivate with one plough. **Vimshatisha** (head of twenty villages) got land cultivable through four ploughs. **Shatesha** (head of one hundred villages) was to master one full village as his remuneration.

9.3.2 Transfer of Administrative and Fiscal Rights

It was not merely the multiplication of administrative units at different levels. Giving away fiscal and administrative rights, including those of policing and administration of criminal law and justice, to donees of land grants created a landed aristocracy between the King and the cultivators. The intensity of the process varied from one region to another.

Dispersal of administrative power which is an important trait of feudal polity, is also indicated by constant shift of the seats of power. Typical examples of this tendency are to be seen in allusions to about nine **skandhavaras** (victory/military camps) in the Pala records. As many as twenty-one **skandhavaras** figure in the Chandella records. However, in this respect the Pratiharas enjoyed relative stability, for only Ujjayini and Mahodaya (Kannauj) are known to have been their capitals. Like the shifting capitals, fortresses also assumed the functions of power centres. It is significant that the Palas built as many as twenty fortresses in their empire.

9.3.3 Vassals as King Makers

The gradual accumulation of power in the hands of ministers is another indicator of the nature of royalty in early medieval centuries. Kshemendra's candid references to the greed of ministers and Kalhana's vivid picture of the machinations and tyranny of the **damaras** make it obvious that the ministers were self-seeking persons with hardly any concern for the public good. **Manasollasa**, a text of the twelfth century advises the King to protect his subjects not only from robbers but also from ministers as well as officers of finance and revenue.

The records of Somavamshins of Orissa show that vassals could even depose and install kings, although such cases were neither too many nor had any legal sanction.

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Comment on the high sounding titles of early medieval kings.

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- 2) Name the main administrative units in different regions of Eastern and Northern India.

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- 3) What do you understand by transfer of administrative and fiscal rights? Write in brief.

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9.4 TRANSFORMED BUREAUCRACY

Parallel to the dispersal of administrative powers as manifested in the localised units was the transformation in the bureaucratic apparatus in the administrative system. Payment to officials and vassals by land grants, the hierarchy of **samantas**, feudalisation of titles of kings and officials and distribution of land to members of the clan are some of the features of this new bureaucracy.

9.4.1 Officials, Vassals and Land

The **Brahma-khanda** of the **Skanda Purana**, which is generally regarded as throwing light on the history and culture of India from about the eighth-ninth to the thirteenth centuries, gives a long description of a legendary grant of a number of villages along with 36,000 **vaishyas** as well as **shudras** four times that number, made in ancient times by King Rama to 18,000 **brahmanas** after the performance of certain religious rites. The donees were to be served by these **vaishyas** and **shudras**. Rama enjoined the people, so transferred, to obey the commands of the donees, who had later divided the villages amongst themselves. That such allusions are not merely mythical but had definite roots in historical evidence is borne out by literary and epigraphic records which are widely dispersed—both chronologically and geographically.

The bestowal of land on the officials in charge of the administrative divisions of 1, 10, 20, 100 and 1000 villages is mentioned as early as Manu (c. 200 A.D.). The practice of service tenure picks up momentum in the post-Gupta centuries.

The **Partabgarh** inscription of Mahendrapala-II records the grant of a village which was in possession of **talavargika** Harishena. There is mounting evidence of purely military grants. Literary works dealing with Bihar and Bengal between tenth and twelfth centuries make frequent references to various kinds of grants such as **deshya**, **karaja**, **gramaja** and **pratipattaka** to ministers, kinsmen and those who rendered military services. The Kamauli plate of 1133 A.D. refers to grant of a tract of land to a chief on **rajapatti** (royal fillet or tiara) by one of the ancestors of Govindacandra Gahadavala. The **rajas**, **rajaputras**, **ranakas**, **rajarajanakas**, **mahasamantas** etc. mentioned in Pala land charters were mostly vassals connected with land. Sometimes even vassals made further grants with or without the permission of their overlords. This is called sub-infeudation and was particularly marked under the Gurjara Pratiharas. Since the original grantee was given the right to cultivate his benefice or get it cultivated, to enjoy it or get it enjoyed, to do it or get it done, the field was wide open to sub-infeudation and eviction. The medieval land grants of Orissa also refer to **bhogi**, **mahabhogi**, **brihadbhogi**, **samanta**, **mahasamata**, **ranaka**, **rajavallabha**, etc. All these appear to be landed intermediaries who also performed military and administrative functions.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries key officials were also being paid through regular and exclusive taxes. Officers connected with revenue collection, criminal administration including policing, accounts and members of the palace staff enjoyed levies specifically raised for them. Thus, the **akshapatalikas**, **pratiharas** and **vishatiathus** (possibly a revenue official of a group of twenty eight villages) under the Gahadavalas received such sustenance.

Early twelfth century inscriptions of the Gahadavalas mention **akshapata-prastha**, **akshapatala-adaya**, **pratihara-prastha** and **vishatiathuprastha**. It is not clear whether these levies accounted for the total remuneration of the concerned officials or just

formed an additional emolument. Yet, it is apparent that such state officials had become so powerful as to claim grants of perquisites for themselves. In sum, the right of various state officials to enjoy specific levies—irrespective of the tenure of these levies—was bound to create intermediaries with some interests in the lands of the tenants.

9.4.2 The Power Hierarchy of Samantas

By the twelfth century a hierarchical system of **samantas** had become considerably elaborate. A text of the twelfth century classifies various vassals in the descending order on the basis of the number of villages held by them: "**Mahamandaleshvara** (1,00,000 villages), **madalika** (50,000 villages)", **mahasamanta** (20,000 villages), "**samanta**, **laghu-samanta** and **caturamshika** (10,000; 5,000 and 1,000 villages respectively)". Sandhyakara Nandi who wrote about Bengal under Ramapala, refers to **mandaladhipati**, **samanta-cakra-chudamani**, **bhupala** and **raja**.

The hierarchy of **samantas** is corroborated by epigraphic evidence too. **Rajanakas** and **raja-putras** figure in inscriptions of the former Chamba state. **Samanta**, **mahasamanta**, **mahasamantadhipati** and **thakkura** figure in some eleventh century inscriptions of Garhwal. The Tezpur rock inscription of 830 A.D. refers to Shri Harjaravarman of the Shalastambha dynasty (of Assam) as **maharajadhiraja-parameshvara—paramabhattaraka** under whom came the **mahasamanta** Shrisuchitta. Shilakuttakavaleya is mentioned as a **samanta** in this inscription. We come across **raja**, **rajanya**, **ranaka** and **raja-putras** in the Shaktipur copper plate of Lakshmanasena of Bengal.

9.4.3 Feudalisation of Bureaucracy

Numerous officials are listed in inscriptions belonging to almost all North Indian states. The Pala land charters, for example, mention nearly four dozen officials and vassals—some of them even being hereditary. More than two dozen officials are listed in the Gahadavala inscriptions. The situation was no different in the territories of the Cahamanas, Chandellas and the Kalachuris. Even feudatories kept a long retinue of the officers. More than two dozen of them functioned under Samgrama Gupta, a **mahamandalika** of the Karnatas of Mithila. The feudalisation of the titles and designations of these officials, becomes a conspicuous phenomenon of the times. An indicator of this development is the use of the prefix **maha**. While the early Pala kings such as Dharmapala and Devapala had less than half a dozen **maha**-prefixed officials, the number went up to nine under Navayanapala. The number of such officials under Samgrama Gupta was as high as eighteen. One can even discern a pattern in this newly emerged set up—the lower the power of the lord the larger the number of the dignitaries bearing the title **maha** in his kingdom. Similarly, the later the kingdom, the greater the number of **maha** prefixed functionaries. The growing feudalisation of officials is also found in the practice of using the same terminology to express the relationship between the officials and the King as was used between the vassals and the King. The expressions such as **padapadmopajivin**, **rajapadopajivin**, **padaprasadopajivin**, **paramesvara-padopajivin**, etc. applied to both vassals and officials. They indicate that officers subsisted on the favour of their masters and thus show that they were being feudalised. Officials were placed in various feudal categories according to their status and importance. Even **kayastha** scribes were invested with such titles as **ranaka** and **thakkura** to indicate their feudal and social rank rather than their functions.

9.4.4 Landholding and Clan Considerations

The exercise of important governmental functions was gradually being linked up with landholding. There are numerous instances of assignments not only to chiefs and state officials but also to members of the clan and the relatives. Thus, we find references to estates held by a chief of the Chinda family ruling in the region of the modern Pilibhit district of Uttar Pradesh. As illustrations of clan considerations, it is possible to cite numerous instances of apportionment of villages in units of twelve. The (Una) plates of the time of Mahendrapala of Kannauj (c. 893 A.D.) mention the holding of 84 villages by **mahasamanta** Balavarman. References to queen's **grasa** and **bhukti**, junior princes as **bhoktsies** (possessors) of villages, **seja** (allotment) of a **raja-putra** and **rajakiya-bhoga** (King's estate) are not unknown. The holders of 84 villages had formed a section of chiefs known as **caturashikas** by the end of the twelfth century. Relatively speaking, the practice of distributing land on clan

Northern and Eastern India

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By the end of the period under survey, the multifarious functions of the **samantas** had come to be recognised. Some of these included regular payment of tributes, compliance with imperial orders and attendance at the imperial court on ceremonial occasions, administering justice, military obligations, etc. The **Rajaniti Ratnakara** written by Chandeshwar of Mithila (north Bihar) in the thirteenth century classifies **samantas** into **sakara** and **akara** depending on their obligations in respect of the payment of tributes.

The Chandellas of Jejakhbukti (Bundelkhand) made frequent land grants to military officials. Ajayapala, the **brahmana senapati** of Paramardin was a recipient of **pada** of land in 1166 A.D. A few years later in 1171, a whole village was granted to the **brahmana senapati** Madanapala Sharma, whose three immediate predecessors were **thakkuras**. The grant was free from past, present and future dues—a characteristic of all Chandella grants. Sometimes death in the battlefield also resulted in grants to military personnel. An evidence of a purely non-sectarian copper plate charter of land given to a hereditary **brahmana** military official is the Tehri plate of Trailokyavarman (1207-08 A.D.).

Grants for military service were made to **kayasthas** as well. Members of the **Vastavya Kayastha** family functioned as warriors. This family enjoyed importance in Chandella administration for nearly three hundred years from Ganda to Bhojavarma.

Though there are many instances of land grants to **rautas** and **ranakas** by Gahadavala kings, military services and acts of bravery are not specified as response for these grants. But it is equally true that they were vassals, distinct from regular officials under the direct control of the state because **ranakas** and **rautas** are not mentioned in the list of officials given in Gahadavala inscriptions. It is significant that the **Latakamelaka**, a satirical work composed in the twelfth century under the patronage of the Gahadavalas, refers to a **rauttaraja** called Samgramavisara. Enjoying a **gramapatta** apparently for military service, this **rauttaraja** appears as a prominent social figure.

9.6 INTER-VASSAL RELATIONSHIP

The nature of the bond between the superior and inferior vassals and between the vassal and lord is rather uncertain. While there is some evidence about a written contract embodying only the obligations of the vassal, the **Rajatarangini** also shows signs of mutual oral understanding between a tenth century King, Chakravarman and a leading **damara** chief called Samgrama. We do not find many such instances. On the one hand we hear of vassals' autonomy in their respective spheres, there is also available on the other hand the evidence of the Pala King (Ramapala) seeking help of his vassals to suppress the revolt of the **kaivarttas** in the late eleventh century. It is, however, interesting to note that the sentiments of loyalty and allegiance to a common overlord went beyond caste considerations. Thus, the **shabara** chief and a **vaishya** caravan leader, who have a common overlord, regard themselves as **sambandhins**.

Some insights into the lord-vassal relationship are also provided by the usage of **panchamahashabda**, which seems to have developed as a **samanta** institution in the post-Gupta centuries. Many inscriptions show that a measure of the high feudal rank enjoyed by some vassals was their investiture with the **panchamahashabda** by their overlords.

A copper plate inscription of 893 A.D. records a grant of land by the **mahasamanta** Bakavarman, whose father had obtained the **panchamahashabda** through the grace of Mahendrayudhadeva (Mahendrapala of Kannauj). Surprisingly, the term was not known in the Pala kingdom, although it is known in Assam and Orissa.

There is little doubt that the acquisition of the **panchamahashabda** was the highest distinction that could be attained by a vassal—indeed, even the **Yuvaraja** (crown prince) enjoyed no higher feudal privilege than this. The **samantas** continued to bear this epithet even after adopting such grandiloquent titles as **paramabhattarakamaharajadhiraja-parameshvara**.

According to a text of the twelfth century, the privilege of **panchamahashabda** signified the use of five musical instruments. These are referred to as **shringa** (horn), **tammata** (tabor), **shankha** (conch), **bheri** (drum) and **jayaghanta** (bell of victory). In some parts of North India, the term **panchamahashabda** indicated five official designations with the prefix **maha**. If the word **shabda** is connected with the root **shap**, it acquires an additional meaning of oath or vow. If so, it would have an important bearing on the rendering of **panchamahashabda** in terms of state officials' and lord-vassal relationship.

The lord-vassal bond and the **samanta** hierarchy do not show any distinctive sign of decay even in the changed economic scenario of the post-tenth century. Trade and cash nexus are recognised as factors which weaken feudal formation. There are clear signs of the revival of internal as well as external trade and currency between tenth and twelfth centuries (see Unit 3 Block-1). Indian feudalism as a political system, far from getting dissipated, shows remarkable fluidity and adaptability. A phenomenon of a somewhat similar kind has been noticed in the 17th century Russia where serf economy began to adapt itself to the developing markets. It is, however, necessary to add that feudalism as an economic system does show signs of cracking up. This is specially true of Western India where the self-sufficient feudal economy had come under special strain due to revival of trade, money and urban growth. The situation, however, is not without its contrasts—the east, viz. Bihar, Bengal and Orissa, show a considerable resilience. Further, land service grants to vassals and officials are more common in the west than in the east, with the exception of Orissa.

9.7 LAND GRANTS AND LEGITIMIZATION OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

As far as the political organisation is concerned, the pan-Indian character of land grants served an important function. This was to give social and legal sanction to the political authority, viz., the King or the vassal. In Bengal and Bihar under the Palas, **brahmanas**, Buddhist monasteries and Shaiva temples emerged as landed intermediaries due to land grants. Elsewhere in North and East India, **brahmanas** were principle donees. These predominantly religious donees were agents of providing legitimacy to political authorities. An important way to achieve this objective was to work out glorious genealogies of chiefs and kings. Their descent was sought to be traced from mythical epic heroes such as Rama and Krishna. The beneficiaries of land donations also tried to provide ideological support to the ruling authorities by undertaking cultural interaction—specially in tribal areas. For instance, an important indicator is the way in which symbols of tribal solidarity and coherence were being absorbed within the fold of brahmanism. In Orissa the political power was consolidated through the effective instrument of the royal patronage of tribal deities. The absorption of the cults of Gokarnāsvami and Stambhēshvari and the process of the emergence of the cult of Jagannath are pointers of the new ideological force (for detailed discussions, see Block-2, Unit-6). Incidentally, these functions of the post-Gupta land grants, viz. imparting legitimacy to ruling powers and providing ideological support were not confined to Northern and Eastern India. They can be seen, of course with varying degrees, in all other regions as well.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Write the main functions of **samantas**.

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- 2) What do you understand by **panchmahashabda**?

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3) Were land grants made by the kings to legitimize their authority?

9.8 LET US SUM UP

The Northern and Eastern India comprises modern states of Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Assam and parts of northern Madhya Pradesh. The political structure of these regions between the eighth and thirteenth centuries was marked by:

- a new kind of royalty which was far from being centralised,
- rise of new administrative units to which were transferred numerous fiscal, judicial and policing functions,
- the emergence of numerous foci of power,
- simultaneous transformation of bureaucracy along with the changes in the real nature of the authority of the King,
- new landholdings as the basis of power structure giving rise to a hierarchy of vassals, and
- feudalisation of state officials as well as of the entire political apparatus.

9.9 KEY WORDS

Adaya	: Taxes
Akshapatalika	: Revenue Official
Bhogi	: Landed intermediary performing administrative function.
Bhukti	: Administrative Unit

Dashesha	: Head of ten villages
Deshya	: Land grant to ministers, kinsmen and those who rendered military services.
Gramaja	: Same, as deshya
Karaja	: Same, as deshya
Khandala	: Administrative Unit
Mandalantar	: Administrative division under the charge of a samanta rather than overlord.
Padopajivin	: Vassals/Officials subsisting on the favour of their overlord.
Pathaka	: Administrative Unit
Pattala	: Administrative Unit
Pratipattaka	: Same, as deshya
Rajavallabha	: Same, as bhogi
Shatesha	: Head of one hundred villages
Skandhavara	: Victory/military camp
Vimshatisha	: Head of twenty villages
Vishatiathus	: Probably a revenue official of a group of 28 villages
Vishaya	: Administrative Unit
Vithi	: Administrative Unit

Northern and Eastern India

9.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The early medieval kings used high sounding titles though their actual power was shrinking. See Sec.9.3.
- 2) In Bengal **bhukti**, **mandalas**, **vishayas**, **nayas**, **vithi**, etc. In Assam **bhukti**, **mandal** etc. In Kashmir **gulma**, **mandalas**, etc. See Sub-sec. 9.3.1.
- 3) The King giving certain rights for revenue collection or administration to donees of grantees. See Sub-sec. 9.3.2.

Check Your Progress 2.

- 1) There were different grants to different category of people like, ministers, warriors, kinsmen or landed intermediaries, like **deshya**, **karaja**, **brinabhugi**, **ranaka**, etc. See Sub-sec. 9.4.1.
- 2) There was a definite hierarchy of **samantas** depending on the size of grant and power enjoyed by grantees. See Sub-sec. 9.4.2.
- 3) During this period a number of state officials were also paid through land grants. This indicates some sort of feudalisation of bureaucracy. See Sub-sec. 9.4.3.
Some times grants were given to such people who did not perform any particular work. The only consideration was their being relatives or clansmen. See Sub-sec. 9.4.4.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) In some cases obligations on functions were attached. In many cases the **samantas** were supposed to collect revenue, provide army or maintain law and order, etc. See Sec.9.5.
- 2) **Panchamahashabda** developed as a feudal institution. It was the highest honour a vassal could achieve. For other details read Sec. 9.6.
- 3) A number of grants were made to religious groups or individuals who were expected to provide legitimacy to Kings to rule. **Brahmanas** were the main beneficiaries. See Sec.9.7.

2 Western & Central

