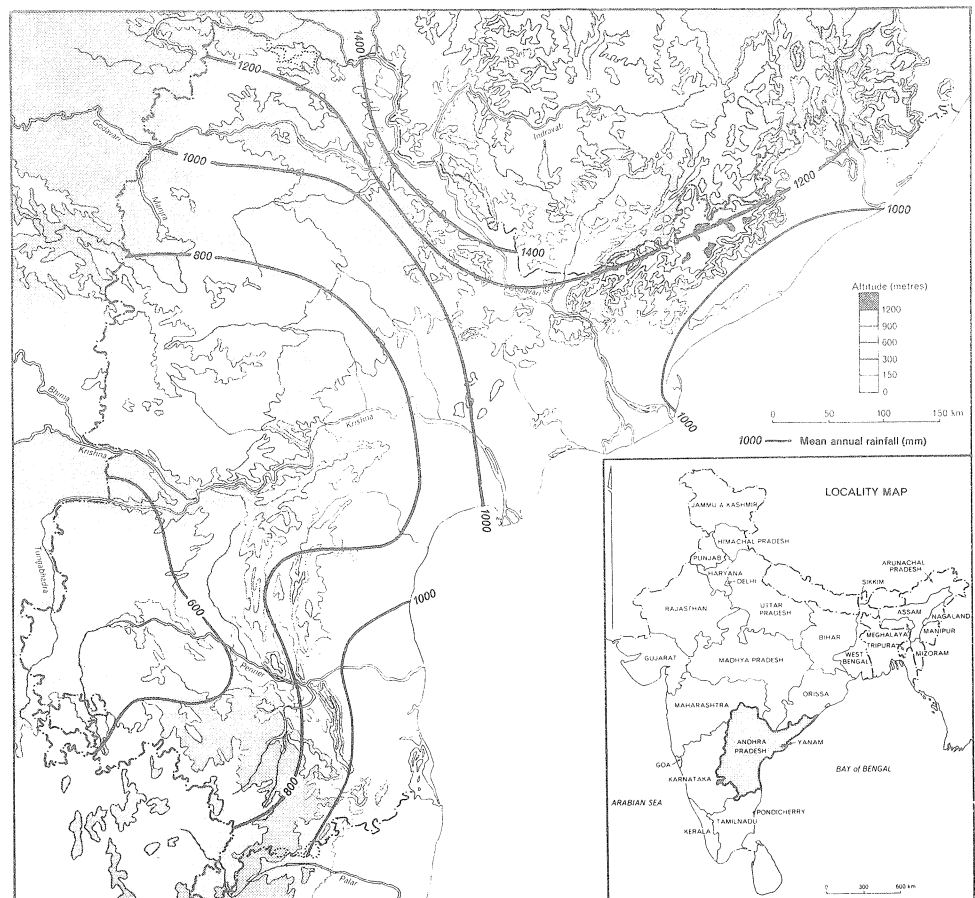


SOCIETY AGAINST THE STATE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE HISTORY OF EARLY
ANDHRA PRADESH

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In most historical literature the concept of the 'State' and its organization has become a yardstick for measuring the degree of civilization achieved by any society. Such a Eurocentric notion has often precluded the understanding of local processes of power. This paper is a summary of a monograph in preparation which attempts to study such processes in early Andhra Pradesh in tropical South India (Fig. 1), between the third century B.C. and the mid-fourth century A.D.¹ The research has shown that one of the most advanced cultures of early India in fact resisted, or did not exhibit, many of the conditions that are normally used to define a state apparatus.



For convenience, the period under study has been divided into two phases based on the dominant cultural remains. The first, dealing with the three centuries prior to the Christian era, is marked by the burials of the Pandukal (Megalithic) complex of the early Iron Age of South India. The second phase, comprising the following four centuries, is dominated by early historical settlements and monuments and a large corpus of inscriptions which mainly concern donations made to Buddhist establishments.

The Pandukal people operated mainly in the drier inland districts, practising both pastoralism and a semi-sedentary form of agriculture, and cultivating food grains that were more suitable for dryland farming. Cultivation was mainly done with hoes rather than ploughs, and some rudimentary irrigation was practised. Although Pandukal people were better equipped than their Neolithic predecessors through their acquisition of iron technology, their use of this metal was restricted to weapons. Its importance to agriculture was only realized in subsequent centuries.

Certain changes began to take place in Andhra Pradesh with the introduction of Buddhism, the coming of traders from North India, and the extension of Mauryan authority into the region during the third century B.C. There developed Buddhist establishments supported by the surplus from a few agrarian settlements which were probably small initially but whose growth became notable in the following centuries. Sedentarization of the Pandukal people began, and Dharanikota-Amaravati was already emerging as the dominant centre. It was here that the first impact of the changes was felt, and from here that new ideas and institutions spread to the rest of Andhra Pradesh.

During the Pandukal period there was a growth of population with increasing numbers of sites as compared with the preceding centuries. Such a growth could have created a certain amount of pressure on practices of extensive agriculture. The potential of the land, the existing technology, and the growth of contacts with North India where intensive forms of agriculture were practised were crucial elements in a process which led to increased output per unit of land, permitting sedentary communities.

The growth of agrarian settlements in the early centuries of the Christian era was rapid (Fig. 2). While some of the sites reveal a transition from the Pandukal phase to the early historical period, the majority of the sites were newly-settled and concentrated in the lower Krishna-Godavari valley and along the coast. Thus an intensification of activity can be seen in the traditional inland areas, and a spread to the wetter but more fertile valley and coastal regions is noted.

There was no noticeable advance in iron technology during the early historical period. The metal, however, was widely used.

Ploughs and wet rice cultivation came into vogue, and there was a definite advance in irrigation skills. Apart from food crops, including the different strains of rice, cash crops such as cotton were also grown - apparently on a significant scale.

The process of change was one in which a large amount of labour input was an important factor in increasing agrarian production, and the transition from extensive to intensive agriculture was accompanied by increasing social stratification. The earlier clans of the Pandukal people had undergone changes, and the grhapati emerged as a social category. Grhapatis were heads of large patrilineal households, and the labour required for intensive agriculture was organized around these households where the land controlled by them was cultivated by members of the family; labourers probably were hired.

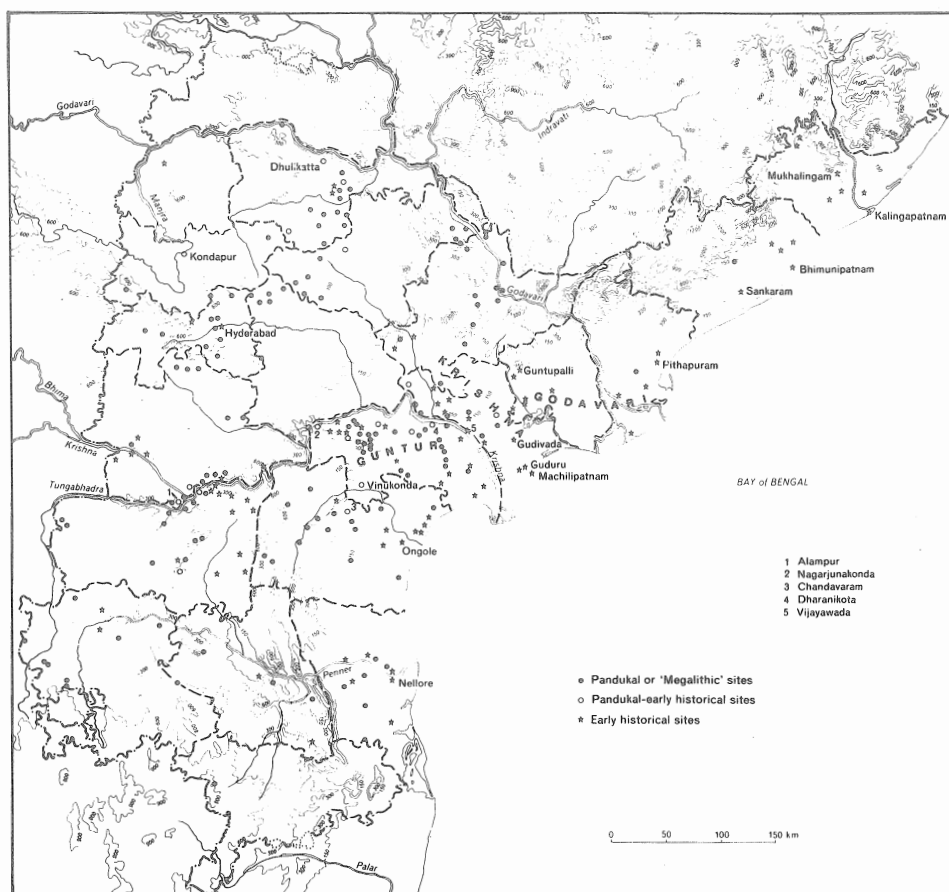


Figure 2. Archaeological Sites in Andhra Pradesh, 300 B.C.-A.D. 300.

th the intensification of agriculture and correlated
e was a development of nuclear modules or small
units. These are ecologically and historically defined,
a central place or dominant centre around which the
ordinate territory becomes a supporting hinterland. Such centres
within urbanising communities became the foci of economic activity,
social interaction and the evolution of local power structures. The
grhapatis emerged as the powerful elites in these modules,
controlling not only land but also exchange networks, and became the
substructures of the urbanising communities.

It is beyond question that there were trading networks
during Pandukal times, and that these increased rapidly during the
early historical period. The development of long distance trade
with regions outside was important in the introduction of new ideas,
and had a crucial bearing on the local processes of development of
hierarchies of power. In certain respects, traders accompanied by
Buddhist monks opened up Andhra Pradesh to the rest of the sub-
continent.

The commodities of trade had no important implications for
subsistence patterns, except at some of the important urban centres.
Within Andhra, intra-module and inter-module trade in beads, various
types of stone for sculpture, trade ceramics, and raw materials such
as iron were important. Diamonds, gold, gems, and vessels of
Northern Black Polished Ware were the essences of the beginnings of
long-distance trade with North India. Similar items and muslin were
exported to the Roman Empire, and tableware, lamps, wine, glass
bangles and beads, and gold were imported. Some of the Roman
objects found in Andhra may have been gifts to local rulers and
powerful, wealthy traders. Detailed analysis has shown that the
Roman Empire, however, does not appear to have suffered an adverse
balance of trade - contrary to an earlier, very widespread view.

While the advent of coinage in the region was associated
with the beginnings of long-distance trade with North India during
Pandukal times, it was only during the first century A.D. that local
coinage came into vogue. Coins of precious metals, both Roman and
Indian, had a limited use and were hoarded or converted into
prestige goods. Coins of base metals, on the other hand,
facilitated local transactions within the context of long-distance
trade.

The extension of Sātavāhana authority and coinage into the
coastal districts was simultaneous with the growth of maritime trade
in the region, and the very distribution of coins along the
principal trade routes points to a monetary economy facilitating
essentially long-distance rather than local trade. The association
of coinage with long-distance trade is further testified to by

certain issues of Sātavāhana coins which were minted in order to further trade with the Roman Empire and with Southeast Asia.

Although evidence for the use of coin money is available, barter as a form of exchange must have continued to play an important role in everyday life. Metal coinage never penetrated the agrarian sector nor created an economic infrastructure to sustain its usage. It is not then surprising that it gradually disappeared in subsequent centuries with the diminishing importance of the region in the long-distance trade of the sub-continent.

The grhapatis invested agricultural surplus in trade, and early craft production probably was centred around the patrilineal household. In the early centuries A.D., some craftsmen became full-time specialists. The artisans and merchants formed guilds, which were important not only in the organization of craft production but also in their roles as banks financing industry. These guilds became essential features of the urban centres, and the heads of these corporate bodies became quite influential in the local hierarchies of power.

During the early historic period of agricultural intensification, expansion and increasing commerce, there appeared a hierarchy in the settlement pattern with the growth of urban centres filling mercantile, ceremonial, and political or regal-ritual cultural roles. The most important of these urban centres were first Dhānyakataka (the modern Dharanikota - Amaravati), and then Vijayapurī (the modern Nagarjunakonda). The remains at these places were scattered over at least four square kilometres, and physically they appear to be conglomerations of hamlets. But these remains, while functionally diverse, are definitely complementary and interdependent.

If the Mauryan Empire (ca. 313-200 B.C.) was a rare period in the sub-continent, with a single politically united state, this certainly was not a centralizing state. The flexible Mauryan administration adapted to regional or local conditions outside the heart of the empire. The extension of Mauryan authority into Andhra Pradesh led to the stationing of North Indian officials or administrators at crucial trade points. These persons do not appear to have organized politics at the local level, and their roles may have been to keep up the flow of tribute from the local chieftains and kings, to facilitate long-distance trade, and to help the diffusion of Buddhism. The local Pandukal people, by controlling the trade, especially in prestige goods such as gold, diamonds and precious stones, may have acquired substantial power.

The martial nature of the grave goods from the hundreds of Pandukal burials suggests not only a violent but also an expanding tribal system. In such a context of endemic danger, it was only natural that Pandukal chieftains should acquire power, and they

already controlled the local exchange networks. These emergent paramount chiefs acquired even greater power through their associations with the Mauryan traders and officials. The local chieftains probably had accepted allegiance to the Mauryan authority, and it is not surprising then that some of them established themselves as kings, emulating their predecessors in subsequent centuries.

These rulers operated from citadels in the various urban centres, and controlled not only the respective nuclear modules, but also the principal trade routes that ran through them. The control of prestige goods which characterised the contemporary long-distance trade would undoubtedly have been quite crucial. Is it then surprising that the Sātavāhanas should have extended their authority into Andhra Pradesh from the adjacent region of Maharashtra to benefit from the increasing maritime commerce, and that they should have issued coinage of considerable variety to facilitate transactions? With the proliferation of agrarian settlements in the early historical period the number of nuclear modules increased. These formed the different building blocks which the Sātavāhanas and Ikṣvākus brought together into a pyramidal structure, where tribute and not taxes was crucial. This pyramidal structure was articulated through marriage alliances and the circulation of prestige goods.

The alliances were characterised by a complicated strategy of marriage-forging. This was achieved not only through the daughters and through the many queens, but also through cross-cousin marriages crucial in the consolidation of the ruling élite. Women were not only given to the lower-ranking aristocracy, but they were also taken from them. The rather conspicuous number of donations made by women at Nagarjunakonda, the capital of the Ikṣvākus, becomes very important in this context. A number of these represented aristocratic families which were scattered all over Andhra in the various nuclear modules. The women who married into the royal family, or the princesses from the latter who were given in marriage, must have been important political representatives, at least in a symbolic way. It is not then surprising that these women should have exhibited such wealth in their donations. Some of the lay women who made donations must also have come from very influential families of householders and traders.

Buddhism provided a significant religious impulse to the evolution of early Andhra culture. The various architectural forms of places of worship, with stone forming an important material, suited the local Pandukal people whose beliefs centred around the dead and around stone. Vedic ritualism and devotional cults also made their impact by the beginning of the present era. They were patronized mainly by the kings of the region, who probably sought to legitimize their authority with the help of the Brahmins. With

the women of the royal family mainly patronizing Buddhism, the ruling groups of Andhra Pradesh seem to have catered well for the ideological support of their own authority.

In fact, the developments towards Mahāyāna Buddhism and the growth of Purāṇic religions or devotional faiths provided the ideological dimensions for the symbolic and ritual integration of the different nuclear modules into a pyramidal structure, first under the Śātavāhanas and then under the Ikṣvākus. Although with the extension of Mauryan authority into Andhra Pradesh there appeared a possibility for the development of a unified state apparatus, with the regional processes of power the necessity for such a unified state did not exist. Was it a case of the society at large resisting the imposition of a superstructural state?

FOOTNOTE

1. I would like to acknowledge Professor A.L. Basham, Mr K. Cowan, Ms M. Burns and my teachers at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.