

KINGSHIP AND RELIGION IN THE GUPTA AGE

KINGSHIP AND RELIGION IN THE GUPTA AGE

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to study and discuss the interaction between religion and kingship during the Gupta age of Indian history, fourth and fifth centuries A.D.. The Gupta age has been selected as the focal point of the thesis for two basic reasons.

The first is its tremendous importance in history and the abundance of good primary source material on the entire period. The second reason is related to the major contributions that the Guptas made in the areas of kingship and religion. It will be argued in the course of the thesis that Gupta kingship constitutes a synthesis of the earlier theories of kingship in India. They put forward a comprehensive ideology of empire and kingship in their inscriptions which reflects the impress of India's national epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata.

The thesis is divided into two parts in order to give proper scope to the development of kingship theories in India prior to the time of the Guptas. The study of kingship in India really begins with the Vedic sources, some of which are dated at approximately 1500 B.C.. The Rgveda contains numerous references to human and divine kings. The two major gods who were associated with kingship in this period were Indra and Varuṇa. Also, in the Vedic period kingship was integrally allied with the religious institution of sacrifice (yajña). Major sacrifices such as the rajasuya and the



asvamedha became indispensable adjuncts to Vedic kingship.

In the post-Vedic period, the views of kingship expressed in the Vedic corpus were challenged by the Buddhists who argued that a good king must be a servant of dhāmma, or righteousness. The Buddhist understanding of kingship made a strong impression on one of India's greatest kings, the Emperor Aśoka of the Mauryan dynasty (third century B.C.).

The epics of India reflect changing attitudes toward kingship and the rôle of the king. In the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana we find a growing idealization of the king. The god Viṣṇu is given a central rôle in the epic understanding of kingship. He is considered to be the chief patron and divine prototype of the king. Viṣṇu is also a major element in the doctrine of the ideal king, or Rāma-type, which is important in both epics.

In Part Two of the thesis our attention is directed to the historical record of the Gupta Age. It will be shown that the Guptas based their understanding of kingship and their ideology of empire primarily on the epic sources. Consequently, each of the Guptas is pictured as an ideal king of the Rāma type in their coins and inscriptions. After establishing this link between the Guptas and the epics, the thesis will analyse the deeper implications of their doctrine of kingship. It will be shown that, while they were influenced by the Buddhists and the example of Aśoka, they retained many of the Vedic customs of kingship including the famous horse-sacrifice (asvamedha).

The thesis deals with the important question of the relationship between religion (specifically Vaiṣṇavism) and Monarchism at a crucial point in India's political, cultural, and religious history. The thesis shows that many of the standard assumptions about kingship in the Gupta age, such as the argument that it represents a divine right of kings doctrine, are false and misleading. The divinity of the king in Gupta times is actually a biproduct of a larger more comprehensive vision of the divinity of the dharma-oriented ideal kingdom (rāmarājya).

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with the religious aspects and implications of the institution of kingship as it functioned during the Gupta age of Indian history. The Gupta age, which covers roughly the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., has been selected as the focal point of the thesis for a number of reasons. In terms of research, the Gupta age provides the researcher with a number of different sources of information on the activities of the Gupta monarchs. One can gain an overall perspective by bringing all possible sources of information together. These include literary, numismatic, archaeological, and artistic sources. In comparison with the historical materials relating to pre-Gupta dynasties, the Gupta sources are remarkably rich and diverse. However, there is a more important reason for focusing on the Guptas. The Gupta age has been singled out for this study because of its pivotal importance in the political, cultural and religious history of India. It is widely considered to be India's "golden age",<sup>1</sup> a title which fits this period in both a literal and figurative sense, for gold was used very lavishly in

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Smith, V., The Oxford History of India, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 172.

Gupta times for coins and jewelry. In regard to kingship and administration, the Guptas established a model of kingship which was adopted by many Indian kingdoms for centuries following the actual demise of the Gupta empire.<sup>2</sup> This model constitutes a type of synthesis which had a strong religious flavour. It is a phenomenon which well deserves an extended examination from the standpoint of the history of Indian religion. Indeed, it is surprising that such a study has not been written previously.<sup>3</sup>

It should be emphasized at the outset that this thesis is basically a study in religion and not in political science. Although it is true that these two disciplines must overlap to some degree in any discussion of kingship in India, each discipline has a separate set of concerns and priorities. Thus, a student of religion would tend to be more concerned with the mythological elements of kingship than a political scientist. On the other hand, a political scientist would tend to place a higher priority on legalistic and administrative data than his counterpart in the field of religion. The end results of each type of study must differ as their initial concerns

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Majumdar, R.C., et al, ed., The Classical Age, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1970, p. xlii.

<sup>3</sup>The best general study of Indian kingship and religion is J. Gonda's Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1966. As Gonda states on page 143, this work is intended as a general summary of the subject for students of the history of religion.

differ. For a total view of the Guptas, this study might profitably be read in conjunction with a more political history of the Gupta Age such as Dikshitar's work entitled The Gupta Polity.<sup>4</sup>

When one approaches Gupta kingship from a religious perspective, many interesting questions are raised. One striking feature of this kingship is the apotheosis of the king. There are numerous signs of an apparent deification of the Guptas in their coins and inscriptions. Certain practices such as depicting the king with a halo around his head are all the more striking because they are not in accordance with the traditional customs of kingship in India. As U.N. Ghoshal remarks:

...the rulers of the line of the Imperial Guptas pushed further than their indigenous predecessors the idea of the king's divine nature.<sup>5</sup>

The divine aura which surrounds the Guptas has led one recent author to claim that the Guptas were actually posing as incarnations of their chosen deity Visnu.<sup>6</sup> The factual basis of this theory will be analysed in this thesis, and it will be argued that the divinity of the king

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<sup>4</sup>Dikshitar, V.R.R., The Gupta Polity, University of Madras, Madras, 1952.

<sup>5</sup>Ghoshal, U.N., A History of Indian Political Ideas, Oxford University Press, London, 1959, p. 397.

<sup>6</sup>Jaiswal, S., The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1967, p. 169.

in Gupta times was actually part of a larger conception of the divinity of the dharma order and the sacred land, or āryāvarta, on which their empire rested.

A fundamental question which this thesis seeks to answer is: where did the pattern of kingship represented by the Guptas originate? In order to answer this question one must delve deeply into pre-Gupta sources which relate to conceptions of kingship. Their pattern of kingship and religious attitudes, it will be argued, are best exemplified by the great legendary kings who appear in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa. Each of these epics took its final form at a time very close to the Gupta age, and the Guptas seemed to have shared many of the ideals expressed in the epics. It will be argued within the bounds of this thesis that the Guptas were attempting to translate into reality a certain model of kingship which had previously existed mainly in legends, heroic stories, and myths. It was this conformity to the ideal which validated Gupta kingship and served as the dynamic force behind the expansion of the empire to encompass all of the sacred territory known as āryāvarta.

Specifically, this thesis will demonstrate the place and importance of three related factors in Gupta kingship. These are:

- (a) the ideal of restoring the moral perfection and order of the pristine age of man (kṛta yuga) through adherence to dharma;
- (b) the importance of Vaiṣṇava mythology, cosmology, and symbols for the Gupta empire; and, (c) the religious significance of the office of the



state and the upholder of dharma. These three factors provide a key for understanding the conceptual foundations of Gupta kingship and, in a broader sense, they help us to grasp the zeitgeist of the Gupta age.

The first of the three factors, i.e. the idea of restoring perfect time, is a feature of Indian kingship in general. When the Gupta era was proclaimed by Chandragupta I in 320 A.D., the king was announcing a fresh start in time. It will be shown in the thesis that the Guptas and their followers were very concerned with the path of conduct of the first age of the world, the krta or satya yuga. Their expressed desire to follow this path reflects a concept which is enunciated in the epics. This concept is best summed up in the phrase, "the king is the maker of the age".<sup>7</sup> It was felt that by strict adherence to dharma on the highest levels of government all the people would be kept on their particular paths of dharma in society. This idea actually involves a reversal of the degenerating processes of time, at least for a certain period of time. It is well known that the traditional Indian concept of time is one of progressive deterioration of morality.<sup>8</sup> But, the idea that a perfect king is able to reverse the evils of the kali yuga is less widely known. This

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Mhb., XII, 91.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Manu, I., 81-82.

thesis will correct the misconception that India has never known an image of utopia or an earthly kingdom of god, which has been argued in a recent work.<sup>9</sup> This is a very important point for it brings out the world-affirming side of Hinduism, a religion which is often characterized as life-denying and world-forsaking.

The second factor mentioned above is concerned with the use of Vaiṣṇava symbols by the Gupta dynasty. It will be argued that religion, specifically Vaiṣṇavism, served to legitimate the power of the Guptas. Garuda, the vehicle of Viṣṇu, served as the family emblem of the Guptas and appeared on their official documents. Viṣṇu and his consort Śrī Lakṣmī were thought to have taken an active interest in Gupta affairs. Śrī Lakṣmī, the goddess of sovereignty, was conceived as selecting the proper king to rule the land, and this selection was thought of as a type of marriage. These and other examples of the use of divinities and demigods in Gupta kingship will be discussed in detail in the thesis.

The final factor will entail an assessment of the role of the king in the pattern of kingship adopted by the Guptas. Here, again, we shall be concerned with the religious side of the question. It will be shown that the Gupta king served both a practical and a

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<sup>9</sup> Drekmeir, C., Kingship and Community in Early India, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1962, p. 300.

symbolic function. The first function was based on the king's ability to lead a strong army to protect the people. He had a part to play in the administrative and legal structure of the kingdom as well.

In the performance of this part, he was aided by his ministers and a host of subordinates. The second function of the king in Gupta times placed the emphasis on the image projected by the king. This is the symbolic function of kingship which was more important than one might suspect in the politics of ancient India. The king was thought of as both the symbol and the embodiment of the state.<sup>10</sup> This symbolic function of kingship requires that the individual king conform to the recognized characteristics of an ideal king type which was exemplified by the great cakravartins of the past. In order for a given king to fill the bill, he must possess intellectual and artistic abilities in addition to being handsome, well-built, and a superlative warrior. The importance of this ideal king type has been noted by scholars in the context of Indian literature, especially in the epics and court poetry.<sup>11</sup> However, to my knowledge no scholar has attempted to study the importance of this concept in a historical context such as the Gupta age. This thesis will make such an attempt and, thus, break new ground for further research in other areas of Indian history.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sinha, H.N., The Development of Indian Polity, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, p. 222.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gonda, op. cit., p. 130f.

### Structure of the thesis

In order to give a true picture of Gupta kingship and discuss its relationship with earlier traditions, it is necessary to go back to the earliest Indian views of kingship. For, it is unwise to try to isolate the Gupta views from the traditions which nurtured them. Therefore, the thesis has been divided into two parts. The first part of the thesis will be devoted to the background material on kingship in India prior to the advent of the Guptas, and the second part will be devoted to the study of Gupta kingship itself. The division of the thesis into these two parts enables us to set the stage for the main portion concerning the Guptas. It will also help to give us the proper perspective on the place of the Guptas in the larger context of Indian history.

The first chapter of the thesis, entitled "Vedic views of kingship", will discuss the foundations of the institution of kingship in India. It is, naturally, impossible to do full justice to the topic in the space of one chapter. However, the broad outlines of vedic kingship will be discussed, and the status of the king in the lawbooks based on the vedas will be summarized. Special attention will be paid to the vedic theories regarding the origin of the institution of kingship since these theories have a bearing on post-vedic views.

The second chapter will discuss the Buddhist and Arthaśāstra views of kingship. Each of these traditions reflects a specialized

understanding of kingship and its purpose on earth. The Buddhist sources referred to in this chapter are primarily drawn from the Pāli canon. In conjunction with the discussion of Buddhism and kingship, we will assess the impact of the Emperor Aśoka on the institution of kingship. This Buddhist king, the ruler of the powerful Mauryan empire, promoted dharma throughout his lands and, in so doing, added a new dimension to Indian kingship in later times. The Arthaśāstra of Kautilya is also discussed in the second chapter because it dates from the Mauryan period. This work is not a Buddhist work, and its views on religion indicate that its author supports the traditional vedic path. These specialized views, i.e. the Buddhist and the Arthaśāstra, are brought together in this chapter because they stem from a very important period on the development of kingship in India. In this period, the second and third centuries B.C., the concept of empire was prevalent in Northern India. The seed of this idea may have come to India via Persia, for there are suggestions of Persian influence in Mauryan times. Indian traditions, primarily Brahmanism and Buddhism, were groping for an ideology for empire. The views discussed in the second chapter come directly out of their search.

In the third chapter, the various views of kingship which appear in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa will be discussed. The focus of this chapter will be on the essential characteristics of an ideal king in the epics. Our purpose here is to establish the existence of this ideal type in literature so that, in a later chapter, we can

show its influence on the historical kings of the Gupta age. In order to illustrate the major features of this ideal type, the stories of two kings who exemplify the ideal will be studied in detail. These are King Prthu, whose story appears in the Śānti Parva of the Mahābhārata, and King Rāma, whose story constitutes the major portion of the epic entitled Rāmāyana.

The third chapter raises some questions which will be answered in the fourth chapter. These questions concern the role of the god Viṣṇu as a patron and prototype of the king. Viṣṇu's association with kingship is prominent in the final versions of both the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, but it is not so evident in the earlier literature which gave precedence to the god Indra as the patron and prototype of the king. The questions of how, when, and why Viṣṇu rose to royal glory are the concerns of the fourth chapter. This chapter will examine the continuity of the god's history in relation to the evolving nature of kingship in India. It will deal with the early history of Viṣṇu and explain the god's significance in regard to kingship prior to the Gupta age. This will be the last chapter of Part One of the thesis and will conclude our researches into the background elements of Gupta kingship.

While Part One used primarily literary sources to reconstruct the heritage of the Guptas, Part Two will rely on historical sources such as inscriptions, coins, archaeology, and art. Literary sources of Gupta origin are also utilized wherever possible. The express

purpose of this transition is to determine the degree to which history mirrors myth in Indian kingship. Therefore, the first part of the thesis is an essential introduction to the second part.

Chapter five, entitled "Gupta kingship", presents a picture of Gupta kingship based on a variety of different sources. It will be shown that this view constitutes a type of synthesis of the earlier views presented in the first part of the thesis. The importance of the ideal type which was defined in the third chapter will be discussed in relation to the individual Gupta kings.

The sixth chapter of the thesis will involve an analysis of certain religious practices of the Guptas. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the question of the religious affiliation of the Gupta kings. It will be argued that their religion involved a mixture of older vedic rituals and relatively newer expressions of devotion to a personal god. In Indian terminology, this meant a combination of karma-marga with the bhakti-marga. This chapter is closely allied with the preceding chapter on Gupta kingship since, for the Guptas, kingship was very closely bound up with religion.

The seventh chapter will discuss the relationship between royal authority and the promotion of the religion of Vaishnavism in Gupta times. We will describe the measures taken by the Guptas, such as their massive temple construction campaign, and explain how these measures contributed both to the popularity and to the content of

Vaiṣṇavism in Gupta and post-Gupta times. It will further be shown that Vaiṣṇavism, as it existed in the time of the Guptas, had a strong flavour of monarchy, and thus tended to re-inforce the authority of the Guptas on a conceptual level. Their support of temples and the practice of making religious pilgrimages throughout the empire contributed to the unity of the empire. It also helped to instill a national consciousness in the minds of the pilgrims who travelled hundreds of miles for the sake of religious merit, often staying in government sponsored rest houses and visiting temples constructed by their kings.

The conclusion of the thesis will emphasize the important finds of the study. In the light of the information assembled in both parts of the thesis, we will reach our conclusions on the nature of religion and kingship in the Gupta age. One of these conclusions concerns the importance of mythological elements in Gupta kingship. In the second part of the thesis we have demonstrated the presence of a clearly defined ideal of kingship, drawn primarily from the epics, which constituted a paradigm to which individual monarchs must conform. This ideal must be viewed within the context of another ideal, that of the ideal kingdom (rāmarājya). These two ideals are integrally associated with the Hindu concept of time and the possibility of reversing the degeneration of morality in the kali yuga. The dichotomy between chaos and order which is so evident in Indian mythology is also a major factor in Indian kingship. Chaos, which



could mean either anarchy, foreign domination, or an unfit ruler, was the polar opposite of the dharma state. It was the reestablishment of the orderly cosmos of dharma and the regeneration of time and morality which was the goal of Gupta kingship, and it cannot be fully comprehended without taking this goal into consideration. The goal is expressed through mythological symbols such as Visnu uplifting the earth goddess. A variety of media were employed to carry the message through to their people. In this fashion, the Guptas gave their temporal order a transcendent and universal character.

#### Sources

The sources utilized in the first part of the thesis were composed over a broad time span of nearly thirteen hundred years. They constitute a somewhat unwieldy body of facts and myths. The stated aim of the first part of the thesis is to introduce the major traditions of kingship in ancient India and to suggest that there is a discernible pattern in the evolution of the conception of kingship prior to the Guptas.

The vedic samhitās and brāhmanas are the earliest literary sources for the study of kingship in India. They discuss the phenomenon of kingship on two levels, the celestial and the mundane. The god Indra is the major prototype of kingship in the vedic corpus of literature, and there are instances of earthly kings being compared with the divine model of Indra. Another feature of kingship in the vedic period is the important place of sacrifices and rituals in

establishing and maintaining a king. This aspect of vedic kingship is especially apparent in the brāhmanas which give the details of such major royal sacrifices as the rājāsūya, the aśvamedha, and the vājapeya.

The ancient law books of India, the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras, provide us with concrete facts on the duties and privileges of a king which are not contained in the vedas. Among the early Dharmasūtras, c. 500-200 B.C., including Apastamba, Baudhāyana, Gautama, and Vāsistha, there is a marked degree of conformity on questions relating to kingship. In fact, they freely quote from common sources for authority, and a number of verses are identical in their passages on kingship. In the later law books, c. 200 B.C.-400 A.D., we find that the powers of the king are increased and an aura of sanctity is added to the person of the king. Thus, the king is included among the eight sacred objects of the earth by Nārada, a view which is not espoused by any of the earlier authorities on dharma. Of the later group of law books, the work entitled Manava Dharmaśāstra, or the laws of Manu, is undoubtedly the most significant and complete compendium of rules and regulations regarding kingship.

The other major works of the later cycle of law books are Nārada's Dharmaśāstra and the Viṣṇusmṛti; their exact dates are uncertain but they must fall between the second and fourth centuries A.D. The first of these works is noteworthy because it grants the king almost unlimited power and unquestioned authority. The Viṣṇusmṛti is probably the first law book with a sectarian bias. This is due

to the fact that the original work was edited and partially re-written by a devotee of Viṣṇu. These two works seem to reflect the religious and political conditions of India in the time of the Guptas. Taken as a whole, the law books give us an insight into the evolution of kingship from late vedic times right into the Gupta age itself.

Another indispensable source of information on kingship is found in the body of literature known as arthaśāstra. The term artha signifies wealth or material gain, but a literal translation of arthaśāstra as the "science of wealth" is misleading because this science deals with a great deal more than wealth. The object of arthaśāstra is to impart practical wisdom to the king. It discusses the essentials of prosperity and security in their widest significance. The major work in this class of literature is, of course, Kautilya's Arthaśāstra. But, we also possess the less famous digest of Kāmandaka entitled the Nītisara. While Kautilya's work is assuredly pre-Gupta in date, it is possible that Kāmandaka may have lived during the Gupta age or shortly thereafter.

The preceding sources all come from the "orthodox tradition" or sanātana dharma, now referred to under the general heading of Hinduism. But, significant views on kingship were also developed in India's non-orthodox tradition of Buddhism. The early Buddhist texts of the Pāli canon contain a great deal of information on the institution of kingship and its relation to the dharma. The Dīgha Nikāya of the Sutta Pitaka contains some interesting discourses in

which the Buddha's views on kingship (or what were supposed to be his views) are set forth. Two examples of discourses which deal with kingship are the Cakkavatti Sutta and the Lakkhana Sutta. Buddhism has also given us a collection of stories about the Buddha's previous births, called the Jātaka tales. Anecdotes about kings, both good and bad, constitute a regular feature in these stories, and we can glean a great deal of information on the Buddhist conception of kingship from them.

In addition to the Pāli canon, the inscriptions of the Emperor Aśoka, c. 270-232 B.C., provide evidence of a Buddhist emperor's conception of the role of a king and his relation to religion. Aśoka concentrated on the universal applicability of dharma in his inscriptions, and he did not emphasize the distinctive characteristics of the Buddha's teachings such as the Four Noble Truths. He was apparently searching for a moral way for all his subjects, Hindu, Buddhist, or whatever. There is a good possibility that the Guptas were influenced by the memory of Asoka and his doctrine of moral kingship. We find that Aśoka's palace still existed in Gupta times along with his numerous inscriptions carved on pillars throughout Northern India. One of the most important Gupta inscriptions was inscribed on one of Aśoka's pillars.

When one turns to the great epics of India, one stands on surer ground in regard to the Guptas for epic heroes are mentioned in the Gupta inscriptions and the whole atmosphere of the Gupta age

seems permeated with epic ways of thinking. On the question of kingship, both epics contain an abundance of material in the form of stories and long philosophical discourses on the origin and function of the institution of kingship. One portion of the Mahābhārata discusses kingship in great detail and many of our references are drawn from it. This portion of the epic is entitled the Śānti Parva or the book of peace. It is probable that this book did not belong to the original core of the epic and was inserted at a later date. This fact places it close to the Gupta age and it is clear that there are a number of similarities between Gupta kingship and the ideas set forth in the Śānti Parva. We know for certain that the entire epic was in existence by the time of the Gupta age, for the total epic consisting of 100,000 verses is alluded to in one of the Gupta inscriptions.<sup>12</sup>

The Rāmāyana had also assumed its present form prior to the dawn of the Gupta age.<sup>13</sup> We know that the character and exploits of King Rāma were very popular in Gupta times. Rāma is well known as a perfect king and an incarnation of Viṣṇu. His reign, known as Rāmarājya, has a definite utopian quality for it was a time when all the ills that beset mankind were absent from the earth. The importance

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<sup>12</sup> Fleet, J.F., Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1970, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Winternitz, M., A History of Indian Literature, Vol. I, pt. 2, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1963, pp. 439-453.

of this conception in Gupta kingship will be demonstrated in the second part of the thesis.

In the second part of the thesis, the source material will change from literary evidence regarding the conception of kingship in pre-Gupta times to historical evidence from the Gupta age. The primary sources for the study of Gupta kingship are the inscriptions and coins produced under the Imperial Gupta dynasty. In these coins and inscriptions, we have a picture of the Guptas as they wanted to be seen and remembered. They are not objective, dispassionate sources for history, but they do tell us a great deal about the conception of the king in Gupta times. They help us to see the ideal clearly, albeit at the expense of reality.

In addition to the inscriptions and coins, the art and architecture of the Gupta age has a unique potential as original source material. The temples and sculpture which have survived the test of time offer a special insight into the religion and culture of the Guptas.

Turning to the literary sources for the Gupta age, we find a good deal of material from a variety of different works. One of the most informative works of the period is the Brhatsamhitā of Varāhamihira. The author of this work was a famous astronomer who probably flourished during the late Gupta age.<sup>14</sup> The Brhatsamhitā

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Shastri, A.M., India as Seen in the Brhatsamhitā of Varāhamihira, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1969, p. 15.

is an encyclopedic record which discusses nearly all aspects of society and science in the sixth century. Although Varāhamihira does not discuss kingship as a separate topic, there are numerous references to the prevailing customs and conceptions of kingship contained in his work.

Another work which offers a broad picture of life in the Gupta age is the travel record of the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien who passed through Northern India during the reign of Chandragupta II when the Gupta empire was at its apex. Fa-Hien does not mention the Guptas by name, but he does praise the just administration of the land and the righteous conduct of the people in India at that time. His work also contains some valuable references to the religious custom of the general populace such as their festivals. This sort of off-hand information from a first hand observer cannot be found in other works from Gupta times, and one can only regret that Fa-Hien did not have a greater interest in kingship.

There is one Vaiṣṇava religious text which probably dates from the Gupta age. This is the Paramasamhitā which was originally composed as a sort of manual for devotees of Viṣṇu. It attempts to cover all aspects of life and explain them from a Vaiṣṇava viewpoint. It contains a number of valuable references to kingship and the relationship between kingship and Vaiṣṇavism. For instance, it states that a king can become the overlord of all other kings simply by

instituting the worship of Viṣṇu in temples.<sup>15</sup> Such a reference can help us to explain the Guptas' passion for constructing Viṣṇu temples.

Our policy in regard to sources from the Gupta age has been not to exclude anything. Thus, the poems and plays of Kālidāsa have been consulted for background information on kingship. The date of India's greatest playwright is now placed with reasonable assurance in the Gupta age. And, his references to kingship, especially those contained in the Raghuvamśa, reflect a viewpoint which is very close to the Guptas. The use of a variety of different materials has been one of the challenges of this thesis. It has enabled us to base the central argument on a well balanced foundation.

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<sup>15</sup> Paramasamhitā, XVIII, 2.



CHAPTER ONE  
VEDIC VIEWS OF KINGSHIP

In India as elsewhere the precise origins of the institution of kingship are obscure. Very little is known about the political organization of India's oldest civilization, the Indus valley civilization. On the basis of certain archaeological remains such as the apparent foundations of palaces, it is reasonable to assume that some form of kingship was the dominant form of government in this ancient society.<sup>1</sup> Due to the decided lack of evidence on kingship in the Indus valley civilization, our inquiry into the history of kingship in India really begins with the advent of the Aryan people. The date of the Aryan influx into Northwest India is a matter of conjecture, but it is probable that it occurred gradually in successive waves of groups or tribes of Aryan immigrants. By approximately the year 1500 B.C., these tribes had settled in various parts of Northwest India and had established their culture in the face of constant opposition from the indigenous population.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence contained in the sacred writings of these

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<sup>1</sup> Majumdar, R.C., gen. ed., The Vedic Age, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1971, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

people indicates that kingship was their dominant form of government. Rather than attempting to construct a large monolithic kingdom, the Aryans seemed to have favoured the establishment of a number of smaller kingdoms. As Dr. Bhargava has noted in his study of this age:

With the spread of the Āryas a number of Aryan kingdoms sprang up in the territory of Saptasindhu. Our authorities mention the names of four kings, Ikṣvāku, Prāṁśu, Sudyumna, and Śaryāta, who founded the earliest Aryan kingdoms. They are all represented as sons of Manu Vaivasvata.<sup>3</sup>

In governing his kingdom, the early Aryan monarch was assisted by the sabhā and the samiti. These two popular assemblies have been the object of a great deal of speculation on the part of scholars.<sup>4</sup> The king acted in conjunction with these bodies and he was expected to be present at the sessions of the samiti.<sup>5</sup> At this point, it is very difficult to determine the extent to which the vedic assemblies controlled the activities of the king. However, it is reasonable to concur with Professor Macdonell's view that the vedic king's power was by no means absolute since it was "limited by the will of the

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<sup>3</sup>Bhargava, P.L., India in the Vedic Age, The Upper India Publishing House, Lucknow, 1971, p. 210. The claim of Manu Vaivavata, the originator of the human race, as a common ancestor for the original Aryan kings is fully developed in the Puranic literature.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Saletore, B.A., Ancient Indian Political Thought and Institutions, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, pp. 390-406.

<sup>5</sup>Bhargava, op. cit., p. 258.

people expressed in the tribal assembly (samiti)".<sup>6</sup>

While kingship was undoubtedly the most widespread form of government during the vedic age, it was not the only system known to the Aryans. Alongside of monarchical states there were non-monarchical states of a republican character.<sup>7</sup> These republics, or saṅghas, were constantly in danger of being over-run by the ambitious kings of neighboring kingdoms. A clear picture of the precarious position of ancient Indian republics is given in the early Buddhist sources.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when one considers the internal and external threats to this system of government, it is remarkable that a few were still existing in the fifth century A.D. when the Imperial Guptas incorporated the last vestiges of republics into their empire. From the viewpoint of Indian religious history, it is a significant fact that these republics were mistrusted by not only the Brahmans but also the Buddhists and Jains.<sup>9</sup> This lack of support from the major religious traditions of India was certainly a disadvantage for the early republics. The existence

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<sup>6</sup> Macdonell, A.A., Sanskrit Literature, Oxford University Press, London, 1925, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Sharma, J.P., Republics in Ancient India c. 1500-500 B.C., Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1968, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Buddhism was quite familiar with republics as they existed in Eastern India, in the very region where the religion was originally propagated. In the Dīgha Nikāya (II), the Buddha discusses the pro's and con's of republics in his assessment of the future of the Vajjis who were in danger of being overrun by King Ajātaśatru. Cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sharma, J.P., op. cit., p. 239.

of these non-monarchical territories is emphasized at this point in thesis to make the reader aware of the fact that kingship was not the sole form of government in vedic India.

The central source of information on kingship in the vedic age is the vedic corpus of literature. This corpus includes the vedic Samhitās, the Brāhmaṇas, and the Upaniṣads. It constitutes that body of literature which is considered to be "revelation," or "that which is heard" (śruti), by the orthodox tradition of India. On the surface, the vedic corpus would appear to have little relation to a mundane institution such as kingship. But, when one analyses these texts one finds numerous references to kings, both temporal and divine. Even in the Upaniṣads, which are the most philosophically-oriented branch of the Veda, there are scattered allusions to kingship and its metaphysical foundation. Yet, there are also many problems in using the vedic material as source material on kingship. As Ghoshal has demonstrated, this material is vague enough to have allowed scholars to construct conflicting theories and interpretations based on identical passages.<sup>10</sup> This perplexing situation is ameliorated by the works of law (dharma) which are based on śruti. Although they are not actually considered as revelation by the tradition, these texts clarify a number of questions

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<sup>10</sup> Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 237.

regarding kingship which are obscure in the Veda.<sup>11</sup>

The following pages of this chapter will be organized on a tripartate basis. The first section, entitled "Kingship and the gods", will discuss the relationship of certain vedic gods, notably Indra and Varuna, with the king in vedic times. This is doubtless a very tricky topic to deal with, but it is one which cannot and should not be ignored. The second portion of this chapter will discuss the vedic theories relating to the origin of kingship. This topic naturally brings up the related topic of sacrifice and its relationship to the king. Only the outlines of this topic can be dealt with in the chapter, for it would detract from the progression of the argument to go into all the details of the great royal sacrifices such as the aśvamedha and the rājasūya. The third and final section of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the conception of kingship that is found in the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras. Each of these legal works contains a chapter on the duties and rights of the king. Moreover, there are many interesting facts relating to kingship and religion which appear incidentally in other chapters of the law books. This information, taken as a whole, gives a much more precise picture of kingship as it actually functioned in society. It provides a necessary

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lingat, R., The Classical Law of India, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973, p. 7.

complement for the somewhat disjointed picture of kingship contained in the Vedas.

### I. Kingship and the gods

Kingship as it existed in vedic times was very closely allied with warfare. A war could erupt at any time between the small aryan kingdoms of Northwest India. These struggles for supremacy among the kings were sometimes major confrontations as was the case with the dāśarājñā, or the battle of the ten kings, in which King Sudas defeated a confederacy of ten kings who sought to overthrow him.<sup>12</sup> Aside from the wars between kingdoms, the aryan kings also faced the opposition of the indigenous population. These dark-skinned people are referred to as dāśas in the Rgveda. It is clear from numerous references in the saṃhitās that the dāśas caused the aryan a great deal of trouble, and that battles between the two groups were not infrequent.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of all the references to kings and battles that are found in the Rgveda,<sup>14</sup> one is inclined to agree with Professor Spellman's view that in early times in India the king was predominantly a military leader.<sup>15</sup> That is, the raison d'être of vedic kingship was conflict.

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. Rgveda, VII, 18, 19, 33, and 83.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., pp. 209-210.

<sup>14</sup>Examples of warfare in vedic times are found in Rgveda, II, 12; VI, 75; X, 173, etc.

<sup>15</sup>Spellman, J., Political Theory of Ancient India, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 2.

The mythology of vedic man, as we find it in the vedas, reflects the turbulent realities of the time. The great atmospheric deity Indra was the foremost of the devas with more hymns devoted to him than to any other deity. He is preeminently a god of battle and conflict. His major weapon is the thunderbolt, or vajra, which he uses to defeat the demon Vṛtra, thereby gaining the name of Vṛtrahan. As Professor Banerjea and others have noted, Indra possesses a greater degree of anthropomorphism than many of the other vedic gods who were closely tied to natural phenomena.<sup>16</sup> The Rgveda gives us an awe-inspiring picture of Indra: he has long, magnificent arms;<sup>17</sup> in size, he is greater than heaven and earth, etc.<sup>18</sup> One other notable characteristic of Indra is his famous addiction to the sacred liquid soma which earned him the name somapa. He would imbibe huge quantities of this intoxicant before entering into battle. His combat with Vṛtra necessitated the consumption of three lakes of soma, a feat which attests to the enormous proportions of the god.<sup>19</sup>

Indra was said to have a close relationship with the aryan

<sup>16</sup>Banerjea, J.N., The Development of Hindu Iconography, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1956, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup>Rgveda, VI, 19, 3. As will be noted in later chapters of this work, the length and appearance of a king's arms were very important in ancient India. They must be long and powerful for a man to be a true king.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., III, 46, 3.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., V, 29, 7.

people, especially their kings. It was thought that Indra could grant victory to those people whom he favoured.<sup>20</sup> An example of this is the aforementioned King Sudās. It was Indra who helped this king win victory against incredible odds.<sup>21</sup> Indra was thus thought to play a direct role in the affairs of the king, for the king occupied the same position among men as Indra occupied among the gods. There was consequently a strong bond between the vedic king and the divine Indra. While this bond is confused with identification in some of the hymns,<sup>22</sup> it is more accurate to state that Indra was the patron deity of the king. That is, Indra was the leading god who watched over the affairs of kingship, both in the celestial regions and on earth.

Indra was not the only vedic god who was thought to have a special relationship with kingship. Varuṇa is also frequently referred to as a king (rāja) in the Rgveda, but the characters of Indra and Varuṇa are clearly distinguished from one another. In order to concisely characterize the distinction between these gods, we may say that while Indra was primarily associated with conflict and warfare, Varuṇa was primarily associated with law, order, and morality. He is known as the great preserver of universal order, or ṛta.<sup>23</sup> Like

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., p. 282.

<sup>21</sup> Rgveda, VII, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rgveda, IV, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., I, 2, 8, etc. Rta is an abstract noun which denotes several integrated concepts: sacred ordinance, order, divine law, truth, right, etc. As such, it is a vedic precursor of the concept of dharma. Cf. Renou, L., Religions of Ancient India, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1970, p. 19.



Indra, he possesses many anthropomorphic attributes. However, unlike Indra, Varuṇa seems to prefer to sit on his throne within his magnificent palace and listen to his spies report on the activities of men.<sup>24</sup>

He is an emperor more than a warlord, and it is significant that he is called samrāj, a term which may be translated as universal monarch or emperor.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, it is possible to see two aspects of the institution of kingship reflected in the characters of the two major vedic gods who were associated with kingship. Indra is the battle-leader, slightly prone to excess and indulgence, ever-victorious and mighty. Varuṇa is the administrator who supervises order and justice throughout the cosmos. The two gods can be viewed as complementary.<sup>26</sup> In time, these two distinct aspects of kingship became amalgamated in the character of the god Viṣṇu, a deity who played a relatively minor role in the Rgveda. A discussion of this phenomenon will be reserved for a subsequent chapter.

As the status of the royal divinities was very high among the gods, we find that the status of their earthly counterpart, the king, was high in vedic society. All kings occupied a position of high esteem and prestige. It is probable, however, that some kings were

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., I, 25, 13.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., VIII, 25, 4.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., p. 288.

raised higher than others in popular admiration. Naturally, the king who consistently won battles and wars became a hero in the eyes of the people. At times in the Rgveda there are hints that such kings were deified and even equated with Indra and Varuna. One hymn in particular has sparked a good deal of speculation about the question of apotheosis of certain kings in vedic times. This is the hymn which celebrates the achievements of the famous vedic king named Trasadasyu. Griffith's translation of this hymn reads as follows:

1. I am the royal ruler, mine is empire,  
as mine who sway all life are all Imm-  
ortals.  
Varuna's will the Gods obey and follow.  
I am the King of men's most lofty cover.
2. I am King Varuna. To me were given these first  
existing high celestial powers.  
Varuna's will the gods obey and follow.  
I am the king of men's most lofty cover.
3. I Varuna am Indra: in their greatness,  
these the two wide deep fairly-fashioned  
regions,  
These the two world-halves have I, even  
as Tvashtar knowing all beings, joined  
and held together.
4. I made flow the moisture-shedding waters,  
and set the heaven firm in the seat of Order.  
By Law the Son of Aditi, Law Observer, hath  
spread abroad the world in threefold measure.
5. Heroes with noble horses, fain for battle  
selected warriors, call on me in combat.  
I, Indra Magavan, excite the conflict; I  
stir the dust, Lord of surpassing vigour.
6. All this I did. The God's own conquering  
power never impedeth me whom none opposeth.  
When lauds and Soma juice have made me  
joyful, both the unbounded regions are  
affrighted.

7. All beings know these deeds of thine:  
thou tellest this unto Varuna, thou great  
Disposer!  
Thou art renowned as having slain the  
Vritras. Thou madest flow the floods that  
were obstructed.
8. Our fathers then were these, the Seven  
Rishis, when time the son of Durgaha was  
captive.  
For her they gained by sacrifice Trasadasyu,  
a demi-god, like Indra, conquering foemen.
9. The spouse of Purukutsa gave oblations to  
you, O Indra-Varuna, with homage.  
Then unto her ye gave King Trasadasyu, the  
demi-god, the slayer of the foemen.
10. May we, possessing much, delight in riches,  
Gods in oblations and kine in pasture;  
And that Milch-cow who shrinks not from  
the milking, O Indra-Varuna, give to us  
daily.<sup>27</sup>

King Trasadasyu was definitely a historical king of the vedic age who was celebrated for his generosity to rsis and for his victories against the dāsas.<sup>28</sup> In this hymn, King Trasadasyu is invested with an extraordinary background. It is said in verse nine that Trasadasyu's mother, the wife of Purukutsa, gave oblations to Indra-Varuna and they, in turn gave her a son who was, in fact, a demi-god (ardhadeva, lit. "half-god"). The implication of this verse is that Trasadasyu was a divine, or semi-divine, being whose conception was brought about by

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<sup>27</sup> Rgveda, IV, 42. trans. Griffith, R., Hymns of the Rgveda, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1963, Vol. I., pp. 448-9.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Rgveda, V, 33, 8. Also, Bhargava, op. cit., pp. 214-215.

Indra and Varuṇa acting in response to the devotions offered by the king's mother. Moreover, Trasadasyu is given Indra's special epithet vrtrahan in verses eight and nine (it is translated as "conquering foemen" and "slayer of the foemen" in the passage above). It is clear from another hymn that this king was the object of Indra's special attention, for it is said that Indra alone aided Trasadasyu in battle.<sup>29</sup> And, in our hymn above, the king is specifically compared to the god Indra in verse eight.

In the case of King Trasadasyu we have an example of a king who is elevated above the human condition even though his parents were mere humans.<sup>30</sup> This case is, however, an exception to the rule. The epithet ardhadeva, or demigod, which is applied to Trasadasyu is found nowhere else in the Rgveda,<sup>31</sup> and similar stories of supermundane births are exceedingly rare. Therefore, we may conclude that while Trasadasyu's divine status may not have been unique it certainly does not represent the standard conception of kingship in the vedic age.

What, then, was the standard conception of kingship at this period of Indian history? In answer to this question, we should first state that the king's status was not precisely or dogmatically defined

<sup>29</sup> Rgveda, VIII, 36, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Dumézil, G., The Destiny of the Warrior, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, pp. 117-18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

in the Vedas. Also, as we have seen, some kings rose higher than others in popular esteem. A great hero could rise to the status of a god, but the common king seems to have fallen short of such exultation. The vedic king stood in the same relation to his people as Indra stood in relation to the gods. This does not mean that the king somehow "embodies" or "incarnates" Indra on earth. Rather, it means that the king was like Indra in that he performed the same tasks which are necessary for society as Indra performed for the gods. This is the real significance of the adage which appears in the early Dharmasūtras to the effect that no taint of impurity falls on kings because they are seated on the throne of Indra.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, one can say that the kings were doing Indra's job for mankind. Gradually, the belief grew that those kings who had lived a good life and discharged all their duties would join Indra in his abode after death. The future was especially bright for those kings who laid down their lives on the field of battle.

## II. Theories of the Origin of Kingship

The vedic saṃhitās do not as a general rule address themselves to the question of the origin or inception of kingship as an institution either on earth or in heaven. The early portion of the vedic age was

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<sup>32</sup>Vasistha, XIX, 48.

not an age of theorizing; it was an age of action. As the aryaans became more established in their new home, however, questions arose which required explanation on the part of the sages. One of these questions concerned the origin of kingship and its relationship to the social order. The answers that the ancient Indian thinkers gave to this question fall into two broad categories. These may be designated as the creation theory and the contract theory.<sup>33</sup> The first theory entails an explanation of kingship on the basis of divine intervention. That is, proponents of this view argued that the first king, whether god or human, was conceived and created by a supreme being for a specific purpose, i.e., protection of beings or destruction of demons, etc. Proponents of the second view argued that kingship arose as an agreement or contract made by a group of beings which entrusted one member from among its midst with the powers and authority of kingship. The raison d'être of kingship in each case is substantially the same, but the implications for the status of kingship are decidedly different depending on which view one accepts. The creation theory allows the king great breadth in the direction of divinity and unrestricted authority. The contract theory, on the other hand, restrains these tendencies and sees the king as a "wage-earner" in society who is

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Dumont, L., Religion/Politics and History in India, Mouton Publishers, Paris/The Hague, 1970, pp. 70-71.

granted a certain percentage of their produce in return for the protection he affords them.

Within the vedic corpus, there are several myths which attribute the origin of kingship to an act of supernatural creation. The most all-encompassing account of the advent of kingship appears in the famous purusa-sūkta hymn, Rgveda, X, 90. In this comparatively late hymn of the Rgveda, the origin of the aryan social order is explained in terms of a primordial human sacrifice of cosmic proportions. Out of the remains of the body of the "primal man", purusa, the four-fold caste system was created from the parts which correspond to the functions of the respective classes:

When they divided Purusha, how many  
portions did they make?  
What did they call his mouth? What  
his arms? and what his thighs and  
his feet?

The Brahmana was his mouth, his arms  
the ruling man (rājanya)  
his thighs were the Vaisya, and from  
his feet came the Sudra.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the major divisions of the social order were conceived as having a common origin. In this hymn, we find the basis for the anthropomorphic conception of society which was destined to play a major role in

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<sup>34</sup> Rgveda, X, 90, 11-12 trans. Bose, A.B., Hymns from the Vedas, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1966, p. 163.

Indian political thought in post-vedic times. The king and the warrior class originated from the arms of puruṣa according to the myth in question. It is significant that in descriptions of ideal kings in the later literature there is always some reference to the long, mighty arms possessed by the king. These numerous references may well contain allusions to the puruṣa-sūkta's statement that the kṣatriya was created from the arm of the primal man.

More significantly, this hymn integrally relates kingship with the rest of the social order. As an institution, it represents the protective apparatus of the organism. It is, therefore, a very necessary component of the whole, but it is not placed in a dominant or independent position vis a vis the rest of society. The Brahman, who sprang from the mouth of the primal being, is actually placed in the dominant position. He represents the intellectual and spiritual component of the organism. But, even the Brahman cannot be completely independent for he is dependent on the power of the kṣatriyas and the support of the vaiśyas and Sudras.

As mentioned before, the puruṣa-sūkta is a late hymn and it reflects a period in which society had become established on the caste basis. The advent of this order, which became more rigid as time went on, had profound consequences for the institution of kingship in India. The king became not only the protector of the people, he also became the protector of the varṇāśrama system which accorded duties (dharma) to each individual member of society on the basis



of caste and life-stages. This added responsibility transformed kingship by the time of the late vedic age. The king's duties as a warrior became only one duty among a number of other duties which have no direct bearing on warfare.<sup>35</sup>

Aside from the puruṣa-sūkta, there are a few other myths which attribute the origin of kingship to an act of divine creation. These are found in the Brāhmaṇas, sacred texts which are appended to the samhitā portion of the veda. These texts reveal a strong preference for monarchy and they tended to conceive of the king as a divine being.<sup>36</sup> It is natural, therefore, that the Brāhmaṇas favoured a doctrine of divine creation although they were also familiar with the contract theory. According to the Taittīrya Brāhmaṇa, Indra, the first king of the gods, was created by Prajāpati in order to protect the gods from the demons (asuras).<sup>37</sup> There is a decided connection between this sort of myth and the institution of kingship among men. For, as noted previously, the king is the Indra among men. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa it is stated that the king (i.e., the earthly king)

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<sup>35</sup> One of the major factors in this proliferation of duties was the economy of the society. A settled agricultural economy had replaced the nomadic ways of the early aryan immigrants in North-western India. The king was given the responsibility for the fertility of the land in this period. As we shall see, the earth was personified as a beautiful woman and the king was viewed as her symbolic husband.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sharma, op. cit., p. 239.

<sup>37</sup> Taittīrya Brāhmaṇa, II, 2, 7.

rules other men because "he is most manifestly of Prajāpati".<sup>38</sup> This establishes the authority of the king on a supermundane level. However, the full implications of this doctrine were not worked out in the Brāhmaṇas. The central concern of these texts is sacrifice, and it is not surprising that they sought to bring the institution of kingship under the power of sacrifice.

The most important royal sacrifices discussed in the Brāhmaṇas are: the rājasūya, the inauguration sacrifice; the aśvamedha, the horse sacrifice; the vājapeya, sacrifice for the attainment of victory; the aīndramahabhisheka, "the great consecration of Indra"; and, the punarabhisheka, the renewed consecration.<sup>39</sup> In addition to these major sacrifices there were a considerable number of minor and occasional sacrifices which were performed for and by the king. We will briefly discuss the character of the two most important royal sacrifices, the rājasūya and the aśvamedha.

The purpose of the rājasūya sacrifice was the consecration of an individual man as king. This sacrifice is consequently of pivotal importance in the study of ancient Indian kingship. According to the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the rājasūya is the sacrifice which transforms a man into Indra.<sup>40</sup> That is, the function of the

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<sup>38</sup> Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, V, 1, 5, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gonda, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>40</sup> Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, V, 3, 5, 27.

consecration is the creation of an Indra among men.<sup>41</sup> The rajasuya sacrifice was a major event in the life of the aryan community and it was conducted with fitting pomp and ceremony.<sup>42</sup> The basic acts in this complex sacrifice may be summarized as follows:

It is in form a soma sacrifice, preceded by the usual diksa ceremony, the upasad days, and other preliminary rites that last well over a year. On the day of the anointing (abhiṣeka, which is generally the first day of the Caitra month, exactly thirteen months after the opening of the preliminaries), the king, draped in regal raiment, takes a bow with three arrows from the adhvaryu and announces his anointment with an appropriate formula. He then steps forth in each of the different quarters and sits on a seat made of the wood of the udumbarā tree, covered with a tiger-skin. He is anointed or besprinkled with a fluid compounded of butter, honey, different kinds of holy waters, and other ingredients, poured over him from a cup of udumbara wood. Soma libations and offerings follow next, after which he enacts a mimic raid in his chariot on the cattle of his kinsfolk, at whom he discharges his arrows. He then sits

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<sup>41</sup>In order to comprehend this phenomenon, it is necessary to comprehend the nature of sacrifice according to the Brāhmaṇas. It is stated in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (I, 5, 26) that the gods became the gods through the performance of sacrifice (yajña). The sacrifice involves a process of transmutation in which one becomes what one was not. There is a strong element of identification with higher beings in many sacrifices. In the vājapeya sacrifice, the king is identified with Indra and his chief priest is identified with Brhaspati, the priest of the gods (cf. Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, V, 3, 1, 2.).

<sup>42</sup>For an extensive discussion of the details of the rājasūya, see: Heesterman, J.C., The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration - The Rājasūya, Mouton and Co., s'Gravenhage, 1957.

on a throne covered with a tiger-skin and plays a mock-game of dice, with a cow as the stake, in which it is arranged that he wins. Then comes the concluding bath.<sup>43</sup>

The most crucial part of the entire sacrifice is the act of anointing the king with a specially prepared mixture of various fluids. It was through this act, known as the abhiṣeka, that the king became "established". As Gonda has noted in his discussion of the rājasūya:

This ceremony itself, being part of a religious service- a soma service - was performed by a baptism of water. It is mythically connected with, and considered a repetition of, the consecration of Indra or Varuṇa. The accession to the throne is an endowment with power.<sup>44</sup>

It is very significant that the rājasūya was thought of as a repetition or re-enactment of the sacrifice that the gods conducted in order to establish Indra and Varuṇa as kings. According to the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, it was only after his great anointing (mahabiṣeka) that Indra obtained supremacy over the gods and became ever-victorious in battle.<sup>45</sup>

Another major royal sacrifice which differs in many respects from the rājasūya is the aśvamedha, or horse-sacrifice. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the aśvamedha is called the king of sacrifices.<sup>46</sup> It could only be performed by a mighty and wealthy monarch for the very

<sup>43</sup> Apte, V.M., "Vedic Rituals", The Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. I, The Ramakrishna Mission, Calcutta, 1970, pp. 252-3.

<sup>44</sup> Gonda, op. cit., pp. 79-80.

<sup>45</sup> Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, VIII, 14, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, XIII, 2, 2, 1.

nature of the sacrifice precluded its performance by a weak or poor king. The danger inherent in this "king of sacrifices" is concisely stated in the Brāhmaṇa:

Wherefore let him who holds royal sway  
perform the horse-sacrifice; for, verily,  
whosoever performs the horse-sacrifice  
without possessing power is poured (swept)  
away.<sup>47</sup>

The essential features of the aśvamedha revolve around a specially selected consecrated horse which is allowed to wander about at will for a year at the end of which it is sacrificed along with hundreds of other creatures. During the year of wandering, a number of special rites are performed and tales of ancient kings are recounted. One feature of the horse-sacrifice which has puzzled many students and scholars alike is the stipulation that before the carcass is cut up the chief queen must lie down beside the dead horse. This act undoubtedly was performed to ensure fertility, but it is impossible to give a logical explanation of this act. Upon completion of the sacrifice the concluding baths take place and the appropriate gifts are made to the Brahmins.

Both the rājasūya and the aśvamedha contain references to the imperial ambitions of the ancient Indian monarchs. This aspect

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., XIII, 1, 6, 3. trans. Eggeling, J., S.B.E. XLIV, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, pp. 288-289.

is most pronounced in the horse-sacrifice, according to which all the land that the horse wanders on belongs to the king who initiated the sacrifice, but there are also suggestions of universal sovereignty in the imperial consecration ceremony. In the rājasūya, the new king is required to take four steps in each of the cardinal directions. These steps probably symbolize the present or potential overlordship of the new king. As Dr. Bhargava has pointed out, each of these royal sacrifices reflects the political conditions of their age:

The description of great sacrifices like the Aśvamedha and the Rājasūya in the later Vedic literature shows that in the later Vedic age ambitious kings tried to be all-powerful by extending their sway over neighbouring kingdoms.<sup>48</sup>

Territorial aggrandizement became an inseparable factor in the performance of the horse-sacrifice in post-vedic times. A king would generally institute this sacrifice upon completion of a successful campaign against another territory. It, in Gonda's words, "ratified his claim of suzerainty over his neighbours,"<sup>49</sup>

Although kingship underwent many changes in the post-vedic period of Indian history, it is true to say that the foundation of the institution of kingship was laid in the vedic age. Two points are

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<sup>48</sup> Bhargava, op. cit., p. 256.

<sup>49</sup> Gonda, op. cit., p. 110.

especially striking here. The first is the concept of an organically integrated society which is based on the principle of dharmā. This concept is clearly enunciated in Rg veda, X, 90, which deals with the sacrifice of the Primal Man and the subsequent creation of the four major classes from his various parts. The ruling man, created from the arms, served as the defender of the organic whole. Even in the vedic period, the idea of a king's defense of his people carried religious overtones. Protection signified protection from corrupting vices as well as protection from external enemies. This is apparent in King Aśvapati's claim which appears in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad:

Within my realm there is no thief,  
No miser, no drinker of wine,  
No man without a sacred fire,<sup>50</sup>  
No dunce, no lecher, no whore!

In this claim we find the basis of an idea that became very important in the subsequent development of the conception of kingship in India: the notion that a king is responsible for the morality of his subjects, and that, under an ideal king, no corruption or immorality would occur in the realm. When this idea is taken to the extreme in post-vedic sources, the king is made responsible for the weather and the fertility of the land as well as the morality of his subjects.

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<sup>50</sup> Chāndogya Upaniṣad, V, xi, 5. trans. Zaehner, R.C., Hindu Scriptures, Dent, London, 1968, p. 102.

The second point which should be emphasized here is the fact that the vedic sources conceive of temporal power as an offspring of spiritual authority. This view of power is stated in a variety of ways in the<sup>51</sup> vedic body of literature. For example, the

Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad states that it is the Brahman who is the source of the kṣatriya.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, it is stated in the same text that dharma is the controller of the king and that there is nothing higher than dharma.<sup>52</sup> The king's role vis à vis dharma was established in the vedic age as a sort of sacred trust. The king was seen as the protector of dharma, dharmasya gopta.<sup>53</sup> This factor made a strong imprint on the subsequent history of kingship in India. We find that Hindu monarchs never proclaimed changes in the dharma, for this was not their prerogative. Rather, as we shall see in relation to the Guptas, they sought to restore dharma as it had existed in the past. Thus, we may say that kingship looked backward instead of forward in ancient India. This fact may help to account for the continued popularity of royal sacrifices such as the aśvamedha down through the many centuries that separate the Guptas from the vedic age.

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<sup>51</sup> Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, I, 4, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., I, 4, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, VIII, 23.. The title "protector of the law" is also used to refer to the vedic god Indra in the same text.



### III. The status of kingship in the Dharmaśāstras

A more detailed picture of kingship in ancient India is obtained through a close study of the law books or Dharmaśāstras. These texts do not belong to the "revealed" body of literature (śruti), the doors of which closed with the Upaniṣads. The law books represent a massive attempt to codify and regulate all the rules and customs of āryan society. They reflect a different historical period than the early vedic writings. In general, we may say that society was more settled and territorially defined and regulated in the time of the law books. Kingship was a special concern for the authorities on law, and they undertook to define the king's functions with an exactitude which is absent in the earlier literature. As Professor Lingat has noted:

In the dharmaśāstras the function of the king is seen under its aspect of the duties incumbent on him in order that his mission should be accomplished. It is studied as an element in the social system of which it forms the keystone.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the authors of the law books viewed kingship within the context of society as a whole. They give us an idea of how kingship worked, during times of peace.

The law books fall into two broad chronological groups.

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<sup>54</sup> Lingat, R., The Classical Law of India, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973, p. 147.

The earliest works are called Dharmasūtras and they date from a period of approximately 600 B.C. to circa 300 B.C.<sup>55</sup> These works are named after the sages who allegedly composed them: Gautama, Baudhāyana, Apastamba, and Vāsiṣṭha. They consist of concise sūtras, or aphorisms, which expound "the acts productive of merit which form part of the customs of daily life...".<sup>56</sup> There is a noticeable continuity between these works on various aspects of the law. Moreover, the later works on law, the Dharmaśāstras, acknowledge the authority of the earlier sūtras and quote from them. The Dharmaśāstras are longer works than the sūtras and they go into the questions relating to the law in greater detail than the earlier texts. The best known and most influential of the Dharmaśāstras is the Manavadharmaśāstra, or the laws of Manu. It is also much longer than the other works in its class, the work attributed to Narada and the Viṣṇusmṛti. The dates of the Dharmaśāstras are scarcely more certain than the dates of the Dharmasūtras. However, we do know with reasonable certainty that all of these treatises on dharma were in existence by the time of the Gupta age.<sup>57</sup> The Manavadharmaśāstra was probably the earliest of the śāstras, and it may have been in existence as early as the

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the probable chronology of these works, see: Sharma, R.S., Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Apastamba, I., 1, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Sharma, op. cit., p. 16.

second century B.C.

Kingship was a major concern for the authors of the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras. The reasons for their preoccupation with kingship are numerous, but the central reason seems to be the relationship between the king and the administration and support of dharma within the kingdom. It would not be incorrect to describe the king as the executor of dharma in the law books, for the king is made responsible for insuring that each member of society stick to his or her proper path of dharma.<sup>58</sup> If people were to deviate from dharma, the stability of society would be threatened. Therefore, the authors of the law books which served to regulate society placed a great emphasis on kingship. The place of the king in society is alluded to in the following passage from the Dharmasūtra of Gautama:

The king is the master of all, with the exception  
of Brahmanas.  
He shall be holy in acts and speech.  
Fully instructed in the threefold (sacred science)  
and in logic, pure, of subdued senses, surrounded  
by companions possessing excellent qualities...  
He shall be impartial towards his subjects;  
and he shall do (what is) good for them.  
All, excepting Brahmanas, shall worship him...<sup>59</sup>

This passage, and others like it in the law books, gives us a clear indication of the paramount status that is accorded to kingship

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<sup>58</sup> Gautama, XI, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., XI, 1-7. trans. Buhler, G., S.B.E., Vol. II, Part 1, pp. 231-232.

in the Dharmasūtras.<sup>60</sup>

In any study of Indian kingship, the Dharmasūtras and Dharmasāstras must be examined very closely for they contain a wealth of information on the activities and duties of the king. In all of these various passages, the authorities on dharma are speaking of a hypothethical, unnamed, king. That is, they are not speaking of a specific monarch, rather they are setting down the rules for all kings. Thus, the rules are given in phrases such as: "He shall protect the castes and orders in accordance with justice."<sup>61</sup> Through such dictates, the authorities on dharma attempted to define the duties of the king with a degree of precision and exactitude which is not present in the vedic references to kingship. In the following pages, the conception of kingship reflected in the works on dharma will be discussed under three headings. The first topic to be discussed will be the status of the king vis à vis religion. We will discuss the idea of sin and pollution and their relation to the king. The second heading will be the king's relationship with society in general, and the third topic will be the role of the king in regard to the Brahmins. These three headings are, of course,

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<sup>60</sup>The Dharmasūtras also make it clear that members of the Brahman class were exempt from some of the authority of the king. As the passage from Gautama quoted on this page shows, Brahmins were not required to "worship" the king.

<sup>61</sup>Gautama, XI, 9. trans. Bühler, op. cit., p. 232.

interrelated, but for the sake of clarity they should be discussed separately.

(a.) Religious status and duties of the king

It was recognised by the early authors on dharma that in carrying out the duties of kingship the king must commit some violence and deeds of questionable morality. Violence had to occur on the battlefield when the king was protecting or expanding the kingdom. Moreover, the king's major duty of administering punishment (danda) often called for corporal punishment. In some cases, the laws called for very gruesome punishments to be inflicted on the offender by the king's order.<sup>62</sup> These facts raise the question of whether or not a king commits a sin in carrying out his duty when it involves violence and taking of life. The law books are unanimous in absolving the king of any possible sin incurred while he is fulfilling his duty.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, there was a positive religious gain in performing the royal dharma. The king acquires a share of the spiritual merit of his subjects simply by doing his job well.<sup>64</sup> And, each day the king who carries out his duties acquires the merit of great sacrifices.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Manu, VIII, 279-284.

<sup>63</sup> Vāsistha, XIX, 48; Gautama, XIV, 1; Manu, V, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Gautama, XI, 11. In this verse, śruti is declared to be the source of this law. The amount of spiritual merit gained by the king is generally stated to be one sixth. This is the same portion the king usually takes of 'his subjects' produce in the form of taxes.

<sup>65</sup> Manu, VII, 305. In this verse and others one can perceive a revalorization of sacrifice in the law books. Royal sacrifices were still performed, but the king could gain their merit by doing his daily round well. This idea is not found in the Brāhmaṇas.

As Professor Lingat has observed, the authors of the law books were "...keenly preoccupied by notions of purity and impurity."<sup>66</sup> The state of impurity, or asauca,<sup>67</sup> carries with it the loss of the power or privilege to perform religious acts.<sup>68</sup> This type of religious impurity could incapacitate the king, for he could not perform his duties until the mantle of impurity was removed from his shoulders. Therefore, an all-encompassing rule on royal purity is stated as follows:

Kings (remain always pure) lest their business be impeded.<sup>69</sup>

In the case of the king causing the death of a man, the king is required to bath in order to regain his purity.<sup>70</sup> This law would seem to indicate that a mild form of pollution was possible for a king.

An interesting justification of the king's purity is taken

<sup>66</sup> Lingat, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>67</sup> This term is derived from the root sudh, "to purify". Cf. Whitney, op. cit., pp. 174-5.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Gonda, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Gautama, XIV, 45. An example of a king impeded by impurity appeared in the Jainīyā Brāhmaṇa (2, 134). This is the story of Indra after he had transgressed the covenant of the gods. As a consequence of his impurity, the gods refused to sacrifice for him and he was rendered helpless until Agni agreed to sacrifice for him.

<sup>70</sup> Vasiṣṭha, XIX, 47. Elsewhere (Gautama, X, 17), it is stated that the king commits no sin by slaying foes in battle. The violence that the king commits in the course of his duty must be controlled and not motivated by wrath which is one of the ten vices of kingship. Cf. Manu, VII, 51-52.

from a passage in the lost Dharmasūtra of Yama which is cited in three of the law books. This passage states that the king is exonerated of any impurity by virtue of the association of the institution of kingship with the god Indra. The passage is translated as follows:

And with reference to this matter they quote a verse proclaimed by Yama, "No taint of impurity, forsooth, falls on kings, on those engaged in practising vows, or on those engaged in the performance of sacrificial session (sattra); for the first are seated on the throne of Indra, (and the others) are always equal to Brahman."<sup>71</sup>

It is significant that the purity of the king is compared with the purity of a sacrificer (sattrin) during a sacrificial session (sattra). According to the early Indian legal tradition, the king's life is actually one lifelong sacrifice.<sup>72</sup> The goal of the king's constant sacrifice is the protection of all beings on earth.<sup>73</sup> Normally, sattras are sacrificial sessions which are conducted over a period of time which varies from twelve days to a year or more.<sup>74</sup> They are generally undertaken with certain goals in mind, such as progeny, prosperity, high position, or the attainment of heaven.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Vasistha, XIX, 48; Manu, V, 94; Viṣṇu, XXII, 47.

<sup>72</sup> Vasistha, XIX, 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>74</sup> Kane, P.V., History of Dharmasāstra, Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Poona, 1930-1953. Vol. II, Part 2, p. 1239.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 1243. The rules of a sattra include abstinence from sexual intercourse, speaking only with āryas, giving up falsehood and anger, and even abstinence from singing and dancing.

One of the absolute essentials of a sattra is the moral and physical purity of the sattrin. If the sacrificer is impure and uncontrolled in conduct, the sattra is certain to be a failure.

Considering the traditional religious meaning of the sacrificial session, Vasiṣṭha's analogy between kingship and a sattra is clear. The goals of a sacrificial session and those of the king are similar: they include prosperity, abundance, attainment of heaven, etc. In order to attain these goals for society, the king like the sattrin, must observe a strict code of conduct involving self-control and a degree of asceticism.<sup>76</sup> All of our law books emphasize the importance of self-control for the king.<sup>77</sup> Without it, the goals of his office will never be achieved. Thus, the king is like a lifelong sattrin. This helps to account for the stress that all the works on kingship place on the personal conduct of the king.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Asceticism had a special relationship with kingship in ancient India. A king could gain extraordinary powers through the performance of tapas, just as yogis, gods, and demons could achieve might through asceticism. Brahmacārya, or abstinence, and tapas were the means by which a king defended the kingdom according to the Atharvaveda (II, 5, 17).

<sup>77</sup> Gautama, XI, 4; Āpastamba, II, 11; and, Manu, VII.

<sup>78</sup> In many instances, the king's conduct is said to influence events such as weather and fertility. For example, Manu (IX, 246-7) states that the king has an affect on the length of men's lives, the crops, and the birth of children. This idea is related to the ancient Indian conception that one can bend cosmic forces to one's will by performing one's function in life in accordance with cosmic truth. Cf. Brown, W.N., "The Metaphysics of the Truth Act (satyakriya)", Melanges D'Indianisme, Editions E. De Boccard, Paris, 1968, pp. 171-177.



In sum, the law books hold that a king is untainted by sin and impurity. The general populace, with the exception of Brahmins, should worship the king, and the Brahmins should honor him.<sup>79</sup> With the assistance of his chief priest, the purohita, the king is required to perform certain rites and observances which were designed to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom.<sup>80</sup> The law books do not stress the necessity of magnificent sacrifices involving great numbers of priests as the Brāhmanas prescribe. Unlike the Brāhmanas, the law books emphasize the morality of the king's duties and compare the king's life to a lengthy sacrifice. In addition to power, the king must possess righteousness.

(b.) The king and society

Turning to the subject of the king's relationship with his subjects, we find that he is required to be impartial and protect all the people in accordance with justice.<sup>81</sup> A major factor in the relationship between the king and his subjects is the principle of danda. Danda literally means a stick or a staff, but the term is

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<sup>79</sup> Gautama, XI, 7-8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., XI, 17: "He shall perform in the fire of the hall the rites ensuring prosperity which are connected with expiations (santi), festivals, a prosperous march, long life, and auspiciousness; as well as those that are intended to cause enmity, to subdue (enemies), to destroy (them) by incantations, and to cause their misfortune." trans. Bühler, G., op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., XI, 5 and 9.

also used in a larger sense to signify the principle of punishment and governmental authority.

In the law books, the principle of danda is applied to all areas of conduct within the king's domain, including civil, criminal, and religious matters. It is entrusted to the king in order to accomplish two goals: the protection of his subjects and the advancement of their spiritual welfare. The significance of the term danda is given as follows by Gautama:

They declare that (the word) danda (rule or punishment) is derived from the verb damayati (he restrains); therefore, he shall restrain those who do not restrain themselves.<sup>82</sup>

The two powers which guard and protect the people are said to be danda in the hands of the king and the spiritual advice of a Brahman.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the doctrine of karma is brought into relation with the doctrine of danda, for it is stated that a king by properly employing danda can help his people store up religious merit which will ensure them an excellent position in their next lives.<sup>84</sup> This is a reciprocal relationship between the king and his people in which the king was thought to receive a portion of the merit (or demerit) of his subjects. The added responsibilities of kingship, as defined in the Dharma-

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<sup>82</sup>Gautama, XI, 28. The root of this verb is dam, "to control". Cf. Whitney, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., XI, 31.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., XI, 29.

sūtras, made the king accountable for any violation of dharma that took place within his kingdom.<sup>85</sup>

(c.) The king and the Brahman

The preceding facts about the king's relationship with the general populace raise the related question of the king's relationship with the members of the highest varna in society, the Brahmins. We have noted that the Brahmins occupied a unique place in regard to the king's authority in the Dharmaśūtras and Dharmaśāstras. They were exempted from paying obeisance to the king, although they were expected to honour and support him.<sup>86</sup> The rationale of the Brahmins' unique position is based on the fact that royal authority (kṣatra) was thought to originate from and be controlled by spiritual authority (brahma).<sup>87</sup> The principle of brahma was embodied in the Brahmins just as the principle of kṣatra was embodied in the kṣatriyas. Thus, the Brahmin is called the source of the kṣatriya.<sup>88</sup> Being on a higher metaphysical plane, the Brahmin is naturally freed from any obligation to bow before the ruler.

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<sup>85</sup> Again, however, the question of who will take the king to task for dharma violations is left cloudy. In theory, it is the Brahmins, but they seem to lack power to enforce their views. Metaphysically, the law of karma will deal with any transgressing monarch.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Gautama, XI, 7.

<sup>87</sup> Manu, IX, 320.

<sup>88</sup> Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, I, 4, 11.

In order to fulfill his religious duties, the king must select his domestic priest, known as the purohita. There are many indications that the purohitas of vedic times exerted a strong force in the political affairs of the kingdom.<sup>89</sup> Two of the most famous and powerful Brahmins of the vedic age were Āgastya and Vasiṣṭha. Because of the great importance of the position of purohita, the king must select the Brahmin for the post with great care. The characteristics of a good purohita are given as follows:

...a Brahmin who is learned (in the Vedas) of noble family, eloquent, handsome, of (a suitable) age, and of a virtuous disposition, who lives righteously and who is austere.<sup>90</sup>

It is clear that the Dharmaśūtras and Dharmaśāstras intended the king to govern with the close assistance of his purohita, who was to guide the king in all matters pertaining to religion and the Brahmins.

There are numerous rules in the works on dharma which are designed to insure the independence of the Brahmins. They hold that the Brahmin is entitled to certain immunities which are not extended to the other varṇas. These include: immunity from corporal punishment, imprisonment, fines, taxes, etc.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, they were entitled to special dispensations from the king. The king was instructed to give land and money to Brahmins in accordance with their merit and

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>90</sup> Gautama, XI, 12. trans. Buhler, op. cit., pp. 232-233.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., VIII, 12-13.

knowledge.<sup>92</sup> Land was considered to be the greatest of all possible gifts. As Kane has demonstrated in his work on Dharmaśāstra, "The gift of land has been eulogized as the most meritorious of all gifts from ancient times."<sup>93</sup> The gift of land often included a village or a group of villages for the support of the Brahmins and their families.<sup>94</sup> As a general rule, these properties were not taxed by the king nor entered by the king's troops.<sup>95</sup>

A good king, i.e. one who follows the rules of dharma, represented a "pure" source of support for the Brahmins. The Dharmaśāstras emphasize rules against receiving support from upright sources. As a verse from Nārada's work states:

Let a Brahman be devoted to his duty and take a livelihood from the king, and let him not accept gifts from persons of vile origin, if he is anxious to observe the law.<sup>96</sup>

The relationship between the king and the Brahman class, like the

<sup>92</sup> Apastamba, II, 10, 26.

<sup>93</sup> Kane, op. cit., Vol. II, Part 2, p. 858.

<sup>94</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>96</sup> Nārada, XVIII, 51. The "persons of vile origin" mentioned in this verse may refer to mlecchas, foreigners or barbarians, who were considered to be outside the pure community. The word mleccha is derived from the verb root mlech which means to speak unintelligibly or barbarously. Cf. Whitney, op. cit., p. 128.

relationship between the king and the people, was a reciprocal arrangement. In return for protection and support, the Brahmins provided strong support for the institution of monarchy. During the period in which the works on dharma were composed the position of the Brahmins had been threatened by the rise of non-orthodox religions (Buddhism and Jainism) and by foreign invasions. In order to counter these threats, the Brahmins staunchly supported a dharma-based monarchy. Another factor in the Brahmins' support of kingship is the fact that the Brahmins assumed a new role in the political life of the state during the period of the Dharmasūtras. This development has been characterized as follows:

The needs of the settled community were bringing the brahman more directly into political activity; he was often the person best qualified for the deliberative, advisory, and supervisory roles of the emergent state - duties that were not incongruent with the priestly svadharma. The growing importance of law as an instrument of social control and adjustment established the brahman as arbiter in the affairs of men, as well as intermediary between the human and the divine.<sup>97</sup>

The authors of the law books saw the relationship between the king and the Brahman class as a complementary and mutually beneficial

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<sup>97</sup> Drekmeir, op. cit., p. 84. Drekmeir's statement may be modified by adding that not all Brahmins participated in political activity during this period. In fact, only a small portion of the total number of Brahmins actually did play a part in politics. His point, however, is a good one. Cf. Pargiter, Ancient Indian Historical Traditions, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1962, pp. 62-3.

compact. Working in harmony, the temporal and spiritual authorities ensured the welfare of the world. A verse from Gautama may be cited here:

A king and a Brahmana, deeply versed in the Vedas;  
these <sup>98</sup>two, uphold the moral order [vrata] in the  
world.

There is an evident tendency in the second group of law books, i.e. Manu, Nārada, and Viṣṇu, to glorify and deify the king. This tendency grew out of the earlier Dharmasūtra proclamations on the king's high status. The sūtras are very terse in comparison with the Dharmaśāstras. The question of the creation of kingship, which is not dealt with in the sūtras, is explained as follows in the

Manavadharmaśāstra:

A Kshatriya, who has received according to the rule prescribed by the Veda must duly protect this whole (world).

For, when these creatures, being without a king, through fear dispersed in all directions, the Lord created a king for the protection of this whole (creation).

Taking (for that purpose) eternal particles of Indra, of the Wind, of Yama, of the Sun, of Fire, of Varuna, of the Moon, and of the Lord of Wealth (Kubera).

Because a king has been formed of particles of those lords of the gods, he therefore surpasses all created beings in lustre;

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<sup>98</sup> Gautama, VIII, 1. This verse refers to the king and his chief priest, the purohita.

And, like the sun, he burns eyes and hearts; nor can anybody on earth even gaze on him.

Through his (supernatural) power he is Fire and Wind, he is Sun and Moon, he the Lord of Justice (Yama), he Kūbera, he Varuṇa, he great Indra.

Even an infant king must not be despised, (from an idea) that he is a (mere) mortal; for he is a great deity in human form.<sup>99</sup>

In the work of Nārada, the power and the glory of kingship reach their highest level. Nārada is the most authoritarian of the authors on dharma, as he states that whatever the king does is right because the world is entrusted to him.<sup>100</sup> Following Manu's statements on the divinity of the king, Narada asks how a king could be inferior to a deity.<sup>101</sup> Of the Dharmasūtras and śāstras, only the work of Narada places the king among the sacred objects on earth.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the king is added to the sacred list which includes a cow, a Brahman, fire, ghee, gold, the sun, and the waters. The exaltation of the king in a number of passages in Nārada has convinced a few scholars, including Jayaswal and Maity, that the work must be a product of the Gupta age for these passages seem to agree with the Gupta conception

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<sup>99</sup> Manu, VII, 2-8. trans. Bühler, G., op. cit., pp. 216-217. The eight gods referred to in this passage are known as the guardians of the four chief and four subsidiary directions: Sun=South-West; Moon=North-East; Wind=North-West; Fire=South-East; Yama=South; Varuṇa=West; Kūbera=North; and, Indra=East.

<sup>100</sup> Nārada, XVIII, 21.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., XVIII, 52.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., XVIII, 54.



of kingship.<sup>103</sup> The fourth century A.D. is the probable date for the composition of this work and it consistently reflects the prevailing attitudes of the Gupta age.<sup>104</sup>

Along with the exaltation of the king in the works of the later period, there is a special concern for the appearance of the king. It will be recalled that Manu stated that the king, "...burns eyes and hearts; nor can anybody on earth even gaze on him."<sup>105</sup>

He also stated that it was an offense to intentionally step on the shadow of a king.<sup>106</sup> The mere sight (darśana) of the king was supposed to bring great merit to the viewer, and kings made it a custom to appear at least once daily before the public.<sup>107</sup> The king was to be adorned with magnificent apparel and jewels in order to enhance

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Lingat, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>104</sup> As in the case of all the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras, there are no references or hints at the historical events that were happening when the Nārada-smṛti was composed. Therefore, it is extremely hard to date the work with precision. For a recent review of the problems in dating the law books, see Lingat's appendix, "Some reflections on the chronology of the Dharmaśāstras", ibid., pp. 123-132.

<sup>105</sup> Manu, VII, 6. The king shines due to the concentration of tejas in his being; cf. Manu, VII, 5. Tejas, from the root ti, "to be sharp" (Whitney, op. cit., p. 62), means splendour, vigor, sharpness, beauty, etc.

<sup>106</sup> Manu, IV, 130.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Gonda, op. cit., p. 77.

the appearance of splendour,<sup>108</sup> The law book of Viṣṇu contains the following verse on the appearance of the king:

Let him be splendid (in apparel and ornaments).  
 Let him smile before he speaks to any one.  
 Let him not frown even upon (criminals) doomed  
 to capital punishment.<sup>109</sup>

The concern for the king's appearance which is expressed in the Dharmaśāstras is indicative of a growing idealisation of the king and kingship which is expressed in these works. The king must possess certain attributes in order to govern properly. It is apparent that in these works the king is understood as the symbol for dharma within the kingdom. The king is thereby placed in a direct relation to the universal authority of dharma.<sup>110</sup> The Dharmaśāstras expressed this concept in a much clearer fashion than the earlier vedic sources

<sup>108</sup> A poetic description of an ornamented king of Gupta times is given by Varāhmihira in the Bṛhatsamhitā, (XLIII, 23-25), trans. Kern, JRAS, 1873, pp. 54-55:

"The monarch, illumined by the multitude of moving gleams proceeding from his numerous crown jewels, shines like the sun at the season when the clouds have disappeared...

Equipped with diadem, ear-rings, and armlets studded with various gems and diamonds, and perfumed by the rays of many jewels, the monarch shows the lustre of the rainbow."

<sup>109</sup> Viṣṇu, III, 86; and III, 89-90.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Lingat, op. cit., pp. 135-136. "The rule of dharma retains its peculiar quality even when it involves juridical consequences. Its authority resides essentially in the faith of the Hindu in a divine regulation of the world, the law of which is expressed by that rule."

which mention it.<sup>111</sup> They posit that there is a supreme ruler of the universe who is not perceptible although he governs all aspects of existence throughout the universe.<sup>112</sup> He is the true self of all beings.<sup>113</sup> He exercises his sovereignty through the eternal principle of dharma. In the Viṣṇu-smṛti, this cosmic sovereign is declared to be none other than Viṣṇu who is given the auspicious title Jagannātha, "Lord of the universe."<sup>114</sup>

Thus, the institution of kingship is related to the idea of a cosmic ruler. It is said that this Lord of the universe created the first king for the benefit of mankind.<sup>115</sup> The authority of the king in this conception is ultimately derived from God. Nārada carries through the implication of this doctrine further than the other authorities on dharma, and he reaches the conclusion that the king can do no wrong.<sup>116</sup> The king is certainly a deity in his own right,

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, VIII, 17, 6.

<sup>112</sup> Manu, XII, 122.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., XII, 119.

<sup>114</sup> Viṣṇu-smṛti, I, 50 and 58. The literal meaning of Jagannātha is "protector" or "refuge" of "moving things or creatures". In Kalinga (modern Orissa), a significant cult grew around the worship of Viṣṇu as Jagannātha. Cf. Mishra, K.C., The Cult of Jagannātha, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1971.

<sup>115</sup> Manu, VII, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Nārada, XVIII, 21.

continues Narada, since it is through his word alone that an offender becomes innocent and an innocent man an offender.<sup>117</sup> The king is still theoretically bound by dharma and the Brahman class, but in terms of accountability he is accountable only to the cosmic Lord.<sup>118</sup> This understanding of kingship is not fully developed in the Dharmaśāstras, but as we shall see, it received a fuller treatment in certain portions of India's great epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata.

Our review of the status of kingship in the law books shows that the institution underwent a gradual evolution during the thousand years or so separating Nārada from the earliest Dharmaśūtras. The law books defined the role of kingship with much more precision than the Vedas did. Yet, the Vedas continued to be recognized as the foremost source of dharma in all the works on dharma. The authors of the law books were self-conscious conservatives regarding the authority of śruti. They accepted the Vedic doctrine of the divine creation of society, and upheld the four-fold division of society. The Dharmaśūtras and the Dharmaśāstras are mainly concerned with the king's role in the internal administration of the dharma-based state. They made him responsible for the spiritual welfare of his subjects, and

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., XVIII, 52. On the miraculous effects of the king's justice, cf. Vāsiṣṭha, XIX, 38, in which it is said that the thief becomes free from guilt simply by seeing the king.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Manu, IX, 243-244.

granted him a portion of the spiritual merit gained by all of his subjects. They steadfastly maintained the Vedic doctrine of two powers, kṣatra and brahma. The Brahmins, especially the learned ones, were accorded immunity from punishment and taxation, and the king was encouraged to give Brahmins lands and money for their support. Finally, the later law books relate the authority of the king to a supreme power in the cosmos. The institution of kingship was held to be divinely created, and the principle of popular election and control of the king was downplayed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BUDDHIST AND ARTHAŚĀSTRA VIEWS OF KINGSHIP

In the preceding chapter, we have examined the development of the orthodox conception of kingship as it evolved through the vedic period to the time of the Dharmaśāstras. While this conception probably represents the dominant school of thought on kingship, it was certainly not the only school of thought on the subject. Closely allied with the Dharmaśāstras, there was a school of thought, or a science, which dealt exclusively with the duties of kingship and the constitution of the kingdom. Originally, this school of thought, known as arthaśāstra, was a branch of Dharmaśāstra, but it gradually assumed the character of a distinct discipline with its own set of texts and authorities.<sup>1</sup> Our earliest and best example of this school is, of course, the Arthaśāstra attributed to Kautilya. Ostensibly, the conception of kingship advanced by Kautilya is based on śruti, but it possesses an individuality which sets it apart from the traditional vedic views which were discussed in the last chapter. An even more distinct understanding of kingship was generated by the heterodox

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<sup>1</sup>C.F. Saletore, B.A., Ancient Indian Political Thought and Institutions, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, pp. 15-23.

religion of Buddhism in the second and third centuries B.C. The Buddhists rejected the sacred authority of the Vedas thereby freeing themselves from the traditional views of kingship advocated by the Vedas. Yet, despite the democratic element in the Buddhist brotherhood (sangha), the Buddhist texts generally accept the necessity of kingship as a means of governing the people.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhists protested against the idea that the king was a divine representative of god on earth and they disliked the association of kingship with sacrifices such as the asvamedha. They saw the king as the servant of dharma whose best qualities were humility and compassion. This almost puritanical viewpoint presented a challenge both to the śruti and to the artha-śāstra conceptions of kingship.

The Buddhist and the arthaśāstra views will be juxtaposed in this chapter in order to compare and contrast two views which fall outside the vedic corpus. The focal point of our comparison will be their interpretations of dharma and the relationship of this concept with the institution of kingship. It is this question, i.e. each school's interpretation of dharma, which pre-determines each school's conception of the king and his role in society. We shall begin our comparison with Buddhism.

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<sup>2</sup>"For both traditions, kingship was more than a fact of life; it occupied an integral position in the society of the day. A rulerless society was inconceivable." Gokhale, J.B., "Hindu and Buddhist Political Traditions: A Comparison", Journal of Indian History, Vol. XLIX, 1971, p. 197.

The early Buddhist texts in general seem to vacillate between a condemnation of kingship on moral grounds and a celebration of righteous kings who ruled in accordance with the dhamma (Skt. dharma). When one examines these references closely, it becomes apparent that the Buddhists were condemning a certain type of unscrupulous kingship and not the institution of kingship in general. They called this unscrupulous type of kingship the "science of the kshatriyas", (Pali: khattavijja), or warrior knowledge, which they placed among the low arts and wrongful occupations.<sup>3</sup> These wrongful occupations (michchjiva) were considered to be impure and sinful by the Buddhist. A king, according to this extreme view, would have to be sinful by the very nature of his occupation. The Buddhists viewed politics and ethics as antithetical.<sup>4</sup> The Jātaka tales contain many stories about wicked kings which serve to illustrate the possible abuses of power on the part of the king. An example of this type of king is King Kalabu who had the Bodhisattva chopped to pieces in a fit of jealous and drunken rage.<sup>5</sup> The uncontrolled and unjustified outburst on the part of the king provides a stark contrast to the calm equanimity on the part of the Bodhisattva.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dīgha Nikāya, I, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Khantivadi-Jātaka (no. 313). The destiny of such wicked kings is hell. The Buddhists went to the opposite extreme in describing the virtues of righteous monarchs in the Jātakas.



If one were to look only at these unfavourable references, it would be reasonable to suppose that the early Buddhists wanted nothing to do with kingship. However, this was not the case. As Frank Reynolds has shown in a valuable article:

...among the early Buddhists there was a general acceptance of the necessity for maintaining at least minimum standards of order in society, and a related acceptance of the fact that kingship, in spite of the dangers which it involved, was an indispensable institution.<sup>6</sup>

While the Buddhists recognized the necessity of kingship as an instrument of order in society, they refused to accept the premise that kingship must be unrighteous and immoral in order to be effective. They re-interpreted kingship in order to bring it into a positive relationship with the dhamma and the Buddha.

A fundamental text for the Buddhist view of kingship is the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, for it is in this sutta that the Buddha discusses the origin of kingship. This sutta also presents a uniquely Buddhist interpretation of the origin of the caste system which contradicts the Brahmins' theory of divine creation of the social order. The Buddha tells the story of the re-evolution of the world

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<sup>6</sup>Reynolds, F., "The Two Wheels of Dhamma: A Study of Early Buddhism", The Two Wheels of Dhamma, AAR Studies in Religion, Number Three, American Academy of Religion, Chambersberg, Pennsylvania, 1972, pp. 17-18.

after the periodic dissolution of the universe. In the beginning of the cycle, there were only mental beings who fed on rapture and had no need of solid food. There was no need for a king at this point for the pure beings committed no wrong. Gradually, virtue declined and as it did the solid world emerged and the need for solid food arose. With the appearance of sexual lust, the situation became very dangerous for all parties. It was at this point that the need for a king became apparent. When the need arose, the people selected the one most qualified for kingship and placed him over them. They gave this individual the title of Mahāsammata, "the great elect".

In this passage, the Buddha is espousing a worldview which is fundamentally at odds with the idea of divine creation of the social order and kingship. Kingship arose as a practical necessity for mankind and the first king was simply elected from the masses. This is a straightforward presentation of the contract theory of kingship in its purest form. Incidentally, this sutta also presents the Buddha's views on the relationship between a righteous king and the Buddha:

O Vasettha, following is an illustration for understanding how the Dhamma is the best among this folk both in this life and the next. King Pasenadi of Kosala is aware that the Samana Gotama has gone forth from the clan of the Sakiyas, who are his vassals. They render him homage and respectful salutation, they rise and do him obeisance, and treat him with ceremony. Now, just as the Sakiyans treat king Pasenadi of Kosala, so does the king treat the Tathāgata. It is because the king honours the Dhamma, reveres

the Dhamma, regards the Dhamma, that he renders homage and respectful salutation to the Tathāgata.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the Aganna Sutta we have a capitulated version of the Buddhist view of kingship. We may summarize it as follows: kingship is a human institution which arose in response to a need for order in society and resulted from a contract made between the people and the first king Mahāsammata.<sup>8</sup> Yet, there is something higher than the king which must govern his actions as well as the actions of his people. This is dhamma. The Buddha who taught the dhamma stands in a higher position than the king who is in a sense the instrument of dhamma. Just as the people revere the king, so the king reveres the Buddha. Therefore, dhamma is called the king of the king.<sup>8</sup> The king is thus placed in a sort of hierarchy; he stands below the Buddha and the dhamma. He is a servant of a higher law and the humility of a servant is required of him.<sup>9</sup>

Professor B.G. Gokhale contends that there were two phases of speculation about kingship in the early Buddhist texts. The first phase is generally negative and is characterised by the grudging acceptance of kingship as a necessary evil. The second phase involved

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<sup>7</sup> Aganna Sutta, 4, 1. trans. Bhikkhu Kashyap, The Dighanikāya, Pali Publication Board, Bihar Government, 1958, p. xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Anguttara Nikāya, II, p. 403.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ling, T., The Buddha, Temple Smith, London, 1973, p. 154.

the reappraisal of kingship from a religious point of view. He writes:

It was during this second phase of political speculation that the early Buddhists ascribed a moral and spiritual character to the state and elevated the ideal king to be the prototype of the Bodhisattva or the Buddha. The ideal ruler is a man of dhamma who has put away falsehood, anger and scorn, is full of patience and forbearance, keeps benevolent company, possesses the ten royal virtues (dasa-rajadhamma)...He is well-born (ubhata sujato), handsome in appearance, possesses great wealth, a powerful army, is a man of faith and charity, learned and wise. He possesses qualities which make for dhamma in thought and action and it is dhamma which constitutes his charisma without which he cannot rule over others.<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of the righteous monarch, or cakkavatti (Skt: chakravartin), appeared in this "second phase of political speculation".<sup>11</sup> The symbolism of the wheel (cakka) may denote political supremacy, in which case the cakkavatti is understood to be the paramount ruler (samrat), and it may also denote the dhamma of the Buddha (dhammacakka, "wheel of law"), in which case the cakkavatti is understood to be the supremely righteous ruler. In the early Buddhist use of the term, cakkavatti entailed both of these meanings. The legendary cakkavattis

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<sup>10</sup> Gokhale, B.G., "The Early Buddhist View of the State", JAOS, Vol. 89, 1969, pp. 736-7.

<sup>11</sup> These two phases of speculation may not have occurred in chronological sequence, as implied by Gokhale. It is possible that two schools of thought on kingship co-existed within the tradition of Buddhism. In general, however, it seems that the glorified concept of kingship, in which the king is likened to the Buddha and vice versa, came later than the negative judgements. Perhaps they appeared after Buddhism had become a political force in society; that is, after the Emperor Aśoka.

of the past possessed both unlimited kingdom and righteousness. The Jātaka tales state that the past cakkavattis could "walk aloft", fly through air, naturally diffuse the fragrances of sandalwood and lotus, etc.<sup>12</sup> When these perfect beings ruled the earth, a utopian condition existed in society.<sup>13</sup> But, due to the degenerating quality of time, the perfection of the ancient kings was lost. It is said to have disappeared when the last of the great cakkavattis obstinately told a lie seven times.<sup>14</sup> Although the supernatural perfection of the legendary kings was thought to be impossible for historical kings, it was still thought that a righteous king might attain the status of cakkavatti, albeit of a somewhat lower order.

One of the most important aspects of the Buddhist cakkavatti concept is the "parallelism between the position of the righteous king as an earthly overlord and that of the Buddha as the supreme founder of the Kingdom of Righteousness".<sup>15</sup> There are numerous instances where the Buddha was associated with kingship, such as his commemoration in stupa form.<sup>16</sup> The Buddha became identified with the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jātaka Stories, trans. Francis, H.T., Cowell ed., Luzac & Co., London, 1969, Vol. III, p. 272.

<sup>13</sup> This view contrasts with the Aggañña Suttanta's statement that kingship came along only after man's fall from a utopian condition. The idea might be that a perfect king could restore the pristine condition. This view is found elsewhere.

<sup>14</sup> Jātaka Stories, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 272.

<sup>15</sup> Law, B.C., India as Described in Early Texts of Buddhism and Jainism, Luzac & Co., London, 1941, p. 212.

<sup>16</sup> This form of burial monument had been used for paramount sovereigns prior to the Buddha. The Buddhists made the association doubly clear by crowning the stupa with royal umbrellas.

model cakkavatti, King Mahasudassana, in the Pali canon.<sup>17</sup> This great king, we are told in the Dīgha Nikāya, discovered a marvelous wheel (cakka) and commanded it to roll; he followed it as it rolled first to the east, then to the south, north, and west. Wherever he went, followed by his mighty army, rival kings submitted to his overlordship without a fight. King Mahasudassana allowed these lesser kings to retain their power if they agreed to follow a basic code of morality: slay no living thing, do not steal, do not lie, do not indulge in "maddening drink", and do not become a slave to desires. This policy of conquest is known as dharmavijaya, "righteous conquest". In the Buddhist conception, the king conquers, preferably without recourse to arms, in order to spread morality. The dhamma he requires of the conquered or submissive kings is not exclusively Buddhist dhamma; rather, it is a universal ethical code.

When the cakkavatti ideal is compared with the contractual view of kingship, it is apparent that the authority of the cakkavatti is non-contractual in nature. This difference is noted by Gokhale as follows:

He [the cakkavatti] possesses qualities which made for dhamma in thought and action, and it is dhamma which constitutes his charisma without which he cannot rule over others. This quasi-

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<sup>17</sup> Dīgha Nikāya, II, p. 169.

divine quality makes it possible for him to be obeyed by his subjects. The primeval contract is now substituted by dhamma and its charisma as the basis of loyalty of the citizens toward the state. The state, in this line of thinking, becomes a quasi-divine institution operating under super-human norms and non-rational criteria.<sup>18</sup>

Before discussing the nature of dhamma, which is all-important in the Buddhist understanding of kingship, the historical and literary evidence from the reign of Aśoka must be introduced. This will shed valuable light on how dhamma was propagated and what it signified under the greatest Buddhist emperor of India.

The Emperor Aśoka became converted to Buddhism while he was acting as emperor of the Mauryan empire. According to the Buddhist sources, his conversion took place in the fourth year after his abhisheka, or consecration as king.<sup>19</sup> The inscriptions of Aśoka tell us a great deal about the emperor's progress in the faith. Apparently, Aśoka became a zealous Buddhist after he had gone through a period of being an upasaka, or lay-worshipper. This story is contained in four of the emperor's inscriptions:

More than two and a half years (have passed) since  
I (am) a lay-worshipper (upasaka).

But indeed I had not been very zealous for one year.

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<sup>18</sup> Gokhale, "The Early Buddhist View of the State", *op. cit.*, p. 737. Charisma (from the Greek word for "favor" or "gift") suggests a personal magic of leadership; and, in this sense, it is an apt word to describe the power of ideal kings in both the Hindu and Buddhist views.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mahāvamsa, V, 209; Dīpavamsa, VI, 18, 24.

But indeed a year and somewhat more has passed since I have visited the Samgha and have been very zealous.<sup>20</sup>

Aśoka's inscriptions, which were called dharma-sravana or "proclamations on morality", were composed and disseminated throughout the empire with the avowed aim of instructing his subjects in the dharma. In one inscription, the idea of issuing inscriptions on the dharma is said to have occurred to Aśoka after he had reflected on the past failures of kings to promote morality among their subjects.<sup>21</sup> The dharma that is promoted in the inscriptions consists of general moral duties, such as obedience to one's parents, and sound ethical precepts. The essentials of this dharma are given as follows:

For noble deeds of morality and the practice of morality (consist in) this, that (morality), viz. compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, and goodness, will thus be promoted among men....

Thereby they have been made to progress and will (be made to) progress in obedience to mother and father, in obedience to elders, in courtesy to the aged, in courtesy to Brahmanas and Sramanas, to the poor and distressed, (and) even to slaves and servants.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hultzsch, E., ed. and trans., Inscriptions of Aśoka (C.I.I. Vol. 1), Indological Book House, Delhi, 1969, p. 177. The word upeta, translated by Hultzsch as "visited" in the last line of the above, could also mean "entered" (Bühler's trans.). This change would alter the significance of the line considerably. The translator gives his reasons for his choice in the introduction, pp. xlii-xliii.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-134.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 136.



There is nothing specifically or exclusively Buddhist in this conception of dharma; rather, it is a universal norm of morality which may be practiced by members of all religious groups.<sup>23</sup>

In order to promote the dharma proclaimed in the inscriptions, Asoka created a special group of ministers in the fourteenth year of his reign. These ministers, called dharma-mahamatras, functioned as "superintendents of morality" in the empire.<sup>24</sup> The dharma-mahamatras were occupied with all sects and groups in society. As is stated in the fifth rock-edict: "These Mahamatras of morality are occupied everywhere in my dominions with those who are devoted to morality, (in order to ascertain) whether one is eager for morality or properly devoted to charity."<sup>25</sup> It is stated in the inscriptions that these ministers were unknown in the past.<sup>26</sup> They were, therefore, an innovation inspired by the emperor.

Asoka's attitude towards his subjects was paternal. It is perhaps best summarized in his statement that, "All men are my children".<sup>27</sup> Just as a father desires welfare and happiness for his

<sup>23</sup> Asoka's inscriptions contain few references to the teachings of the Buddha. There is no mention of such cardinal tenets as the four noble truths or the doctrine of nirvāṇa. The inscriptions were not used to convey philosophy. This task was left to qualified teachers of the saṅgha.

<sup>24</sup> Hultzsch; op. cit., p. xl.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

own children, so Aśoka is said to have desired the welfare and happiness of his subjects "in this world and in the other world".<sup>28</sup> He viewed his responsibilities as emperor as a debt he owed to all animate creatures as he states in the following stanza:

Whatever effort I am making, (is made) in order  
that I may discharge the debt (which I owe) to  
living beings, (that) I may make them happy in  
this world, and (that) they may attain heaven  
in the other (world).<sup>29</sup>

The concept of the king's debt to society goes back to the pre-Mauryan understanding of the obligation of the ruler to the people.<sup>30</sup> However, Aśoka's means to accomplishing the end, such as "proclamations of dharma" and "superintendents of dharma", are unlike anything that preceded him. These innovations sprang from the mind of one of the most unusual and outstanding kings of ancient India. The example he set, one of a universal empire with an enlightened and religiously-oriented monarch, was destined to become an ideal for subsequent

<sup>28</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 13. The "other world" in this instance signifies heaven (svarga— a term which is often used in Aśoka's inscriptions). The goal of heaven is not characteristic of the Buddha's teachings, for re-birth even in celestial domains is not held to be nirvana. The term svarga is non-Buddhist in origin and it is used to signify "the light-world heaven of the gods" in vedic and epic texts. Cf. Hopkins, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., pp. 49-53.

monarchs to emulate.<sup>31</sup>

The numerous historical achievements of the Emperor Aśoka formed the basis of the legend of Aśoka, in which Aśoka assumes the characteristics of the ideal cakkavattis of ages past including their supernatural powers. The best literary source for the legend of Aśoka is the Aśokavadana, the substance of which may date from as early as 150 to 50 B.C.<sup>32</sup> There are many interesting facts on kingship contained in this work. To me, the most striking impression of the work is the expansion of the king's powers which are said to affect all areas of the created universe. Jean Przyluski comments on the unlimited powers of the king in this work as follows:

Aśoka who is an earthly king is at the same time the sovereign of hell. This is certainly in harmony with the peculiar character of Aśoka's kingship. The episode of the submission of the nāgas has previously enabled us to realise the principle that the authority of the powerful Chakravartin is unlimited. He commands imperiously in the realm of air, below the surface of the earth and underwater. It would not be enough to say that he wields the powers of a god; very

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<sup>31</sup>The influence of Aśoka on subsequent kings is a debatable question. Romila Thapar, in her excellent study of Aśoka, views his experiment with dhamma as a failure which was forgotten along with the name of Aśoka soon after his death. (Thapar, op. cit., p. 216). My feeling is that this judgement is unduly harsh. Aśoka certainly lived on in Buddhist literature as a model king, and Aśoka's numerous monuments including the royal palace at Pataliputra were standing as objects of wonder in Gupta times. The fact of an all-India empire under a righteous king could not simply be forgotten in my opinion. This point will be re-introduced below.

<sup>32</sup>Przyluski, J., The Legend of Emperor Aśoka, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1967, p. 1.

often the gods themselves have been conceived after the image of earthly rulers. But while all confine their activities to a particular region of the universe or preside over the same category of phenomena, Chakravartin Aśoka is never known to have possessed a limited dominion or any specialised activity. He is at first represented to be an earthly ruler, and afterwards as his legend undergoes a progressive development he is found besides to encroach upon the domain reserved for the gods; properly speaking he now tends to become a king of the gods.<sup>33</sup>

The idea that the supreme cakkavatti stands above the gods that preside over the universe is a distinctly Buddhist interpretation. In the Pāli canon, the existence of gods such as Brahmā and Indra is not denied; yet, they are clearly subordinated to the Buddha and the dhmma. A good example of the subordination of vedic gods appears in the twenty-first discourse of the Dīgha Nikāya, which tells the story of Indra's visit to Buddha. Indra comes to the Buddha as a student to the Master, and there is a great deal of respect between the two. Buddha addresses Indra, who is called Sakka, as the "king of gods" and "venerable one" (ayasma). At the conclusion of the discourse, Indra declares that the worship which he formerly directed to Brahmā would thenceforth be offered to the Buddha.<sup>34</sup> With this subordination of the vedic gods to the Buddha, it is understandable that a supreme

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Sakkapanha Suttanta, Dīgha Nikāya, II, pp. 299ff. Also, cf. Cōmaraswamy, A., "Indra, with special reference to Indra's visit", (Early Indian Iconography, I.), Eastern Art, No. 1, 1928, pp. 32-41. Another illustration of the inferiority of vedic gods, in this case Brahmā, appears in the first discourse of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Brahmajāla Suttanta.

cakkavatti would be placed above the gods, for the cakkavatti was more closely associated with the Buddha and the dhamma than the vedic gods.<sup>35</sup>

In the Buddhist sources, the cakkavatti king is said to bring about material as well as spiritual well-being. In fact, it has been noted that in the Cakkavatti Suttanta poverty is considered the root cause of all degeneration, material and spiritual.<sup>36</sup> In the Dalhanemi line of cakkavattis, discussed in this sutta, the last king (number eight) failed to learn his duties and thereby brought about a condition of poverty in the land which in turn produced theft, murder and the other evils which plague society. In this fashion, poverty brought about the decline and fall of righteousness. However, the Buddha predicted that at a time in the future another perfect cakkavatti king would appear and eradicate poverty and restore dhamma.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The close affinity between the Buddha and a cakkavatti king is discussed in the Lakkhana Suttanta of the Dīgha Nikāya which deals with the marks of a great man. The Buddha is herein quoted as saying: "There are thirty-two special marks of the superman, O Bhikkhus, for whom two careers lie open, and none other. If he lives at home, he becomes a Cakkavatti king, a righteous Lord of the Right, Ruler of the four quarters, conqueror, Guardian of the People, is owner of the Seven Treasures....But, if such a one renounces home and adopts the homeless life of a monk, he becomes a Buddha Supreme, dispeller of the veil of darkness from the world." The Buddha goes on to enumerate the thirty two marks and explain that they are the result of good actions in prior births. It is apparent that the Buddha is not associating himself with all kings, but only with the exceptional models of righteous kingship.

<sup>36</sup> Dīgha Nikāya, III, gen. ed. Kashyap, J., Pali Publication Board (Bihar Government), 1958, p. xxi.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., III, p. 62. This prediction seems to imply that poverty will persist for a long while before being removed by this future cakkavatti whose name is Sankha.

The authors of the Pali canon thus recognised that the dhamma could only be firmly established in a land of material well-being, where dire poverty does not threaten society and drive men to crime.

At this point, we may attempt to summarize three essential components of the Buddhist view of kingship as it is found in the early Buddhist sources. In the case of each component, there are both pre-Buddhist and Buddhist elements. (a.) Dhamma. The concept of dhamma is central in the Buddhist understanding of kingship. The cakkavatti was thought of as the necessary instrument through which dhamma was established and spread on earth. He is thus almost on a par with the Buddha, yet lacking the supreme enlightenment which the Buddha possessed. The king served a positive and active role in regard to the dhamma. As demonstrated by the example of the model cakkavatti Mahasudassana, the king should compel those under his power to follow certain moral precepts in accordance with dhamma. The dhamma promoted by Buddhist kings is not an exclusively Buddhist formulation. Rather, it is a type of morality which would be suitable to followers of other traditions. Only in the promotion of ahimsā (non-injury) does this dhamma conflict with a prevailing religious practice: i.e., animal sacrifice.<sup>38</sup> The Buddhist king acted as a teacher of dhamma in its

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<sup>38</sup> Thus, Asoka in the first rock edict, section B, explicitly prohibits the killing of animals at sacrifices. Along with animal sacrifice, Asoka frowned on certain festive gatherings (samaja) which probably entailed excesses of various sorts (Ibid., C,D).

broadest sense. Yet, this dhamma is not associated with caste duties (varnadharma), for Buddhism does not accept the traditional Brahmanical view of caste.<sup>39</sup> In the inscriptions of Aśoka, the statement is often made that this dhamma is for all men of all stations in life. Indeed, he states in the tenth rock edict that it is more difficult for a high person in society to accomplish this dhamma than for a lowly person.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the dhamma to be promoted by Buddhist kings may correctly be understood as a universal code of morality to be followed by all persons irrespective of caste and social position.

Dhamma is closely associated with the idea of cosmic order in the early Buddhist sources. When kings follow the dhamma, it is said, their ministers and subjects also follow it and this righteousness keeps the sun and moon going in their right courses.<sup>41</sup> The importance of the king's righteousness in insuring the fertility of the land is illustrated by the story of King Brahmadatta of Banaras who practiced unrighteous rule and discovered that the land became bad and the fruits and vegetables lost their flavor and sweetness.<sup>42</sup> The magical power of the righteous king over the forces of nature is

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Aggaṇṇa Suttanta, Dīgha Nikāya, III, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Hultzsch, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Dīgha Nikāya, III, p. 114. Also, Anguttara Nikāya, II, pp. 74-6.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Rajovada Jātaka, Jātaka Tales (no. 334).

not explained in the Buddhist sources. In the opinion of the present writer, this power is related to ancient Indian belief that one can influence, and even control, cosmic forces through the perfect performance of one's function in life.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, dhamma signifies the force of Truth present throughout the cosmos, which all beings should recognise and respect. This understanding of the term is actually complementary to the understanding of dhamma as "morality", for the Buddhist code of morality for men is based on the recognition of universal laws, or dhamma in the second sense.

(b.) Kingdom (rattha). The authors of the Pali canon tend to visualise the kingdom of a cakkavatti as an empire united by the dhamma. The concept of righteous conquest (dharmavijaya) is central to the Buddhist understanding of kingdom. For, the kingdom of a cakkavatti is not territorially limited. On the contrary, it is an ever-expansive kingdom based on the principle of righteous conquest. As the pattern of King Mahasudassana's conquest indicates, the cakkavatti need not attempt to rule his vast territories centrally; rather, he should establish a tributary king who has sworn to uphold the dhamma in his land. It was recognised by the Buddhist canonists that the stability of the kingdom was dependent on the material as well as the spiritual well-being of

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Brown, W.N., "The Metaphysics of the Truth Act (satyakriya)", Melanges D'Indianisme A La Memoire De Louis Renou, Editions E. De Boccard, Paris, 1968, pp. 171-179.



the people. The responsibility for this stability was placed to a large extent squarely on the shoulders of the king, and it was held that a kingdom (rattha) without a king was naked and cannot stand.<sup>44</sup>

(c.) King. Although the Buddhists rejected the idea of the divine creation of the king and his office, they did accord a quasi-divinity to a righteous monarch. In a late canonical passage it is stated that kings are gods in public opinion (sammutideva).<sup>45</sup> Yet, we have seen that a supreme cakkavatti is in several respects superior to the gods (devas). The religious status of the king is directly dependent on his adherence to dhamma. The scale of kings stretches from those dispicable monarchs bound for hell, such as King Kalabu (Jataka, no. 313), to those identified with the Buddha, such as King Mahasudassana. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Buddhist sources posit one absolute view of kings; rather, they grade them in accordance with the principle of dhamma.

In the descriptions of righteous kings in the Buddhist sources, certain characteristics are emphasized. There is a strong emphasis on self-discipline and non-injury. A king is supposed to win over his people by practicing the four elements of popularity (samgahayatthu): liberality, affability, beneficent rule, and

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> Chulla Niddesa, 307; Vibhanga, 422.

impartiality.<sup>46</sup> As one would expect, the Buddhist sources do not mention the king's duty of performing major sacrifices such as the horse-sacrifice (aśvamedha), for this entails the taking of many lives. The king was expected to follow the basic Buddhist code of conduct (sila). Thus, the king was viewed as a lay-disciple (upasaka) in the order of Buddhism, and as the primary benefactor of the order of monks (saṅgha).

#### The Arthaśāstra

At an undeterminable point in the history of Indian kingship, probably in the late vedic age, a science of kingship and government appeared. Originally, it was a branch of the broader science of dharma but it gradually assumed a special character of its own. This happened at a time when the subject of kingship had become a complex matter. And, as the great Indologist Louis Renou observed:

In India to penetrate a subject more deeply  
is to classify it further.<sup>47</sup>

On the surface, the science of kingship, known as arthaśāstra, appears divorced from religion, for it is primarily concerned with the state and governmental matters. However, a closer examination reveals that arthaśāstra takes the vedic or Brahmanical religious system for granted. It does not question the authority of the Vedas

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<sup>46</sup> Jātaka Tales, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 176.

<sup>47</sup> Renou, L., Religions of Ancient India, Schocken Books, New York, 1970, p. 72.

on questions of legality and tradition. Therefore, unlike Buddhism, the arthaśāstra follows the "orthodox" tradition of India.

The Arthaśāstra of Kautilya is the earliest and best-known text of this genre of literature. In the opening lines of the work, the author announces the intent of the work: it is to serve as a summary or digest of the previous works on arthaśāstra. The dates of the earlier works are impossible to determine, but the date of the Arthaśāstra has been placed with reasonable assurance in the third century B.C., although there were probably later additions to the original text. By the third or fourth century A.D., the Arthaśāstra had taken its final form in the Sanskrit language.<sup>48</sup> Kautilya's allusion to the many authorities in arthaśāstra that went before him gives one the impression that it is a very ancient science with an important place in Indian political thought.

At the outset of our consideration of the Arthaśāstra it should be noted that the state which Kautilya refers to is much larger and more complex than the kingdoms of the vedic age. Kautilya was concerned with conquest and incorporation of territory on an imperial scale. He wrote:

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Sastri and Srinivasachari, Advanced History of India, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1970, p. 119.

The king who administers justice in accordance with sacred law (dharma), evidence (vyavahāra), history (saṁsthā), and edicts of kings (nyaya), which is the fourth, will be able to conquer the whole world bounded by the four quarters.<sup>49</sup>

The conception of an empire "bounded by the four quarters" (chaturantam mahim) is foreign to the older texts which deal with kingship. In the Dharmasāstras, for example, kingdoms are spoken of as relatively small states with a fixed amount of territory. In the Arthasāstra, on the other hand, one gets a picture of the ascent of a king from a relatively small state to imperial overlordship of many kingdoms.<sup>50</sup> This picture was probably drawn on the example of the Mauryan empire. For, Candragupta Maurya fits Kautilya's description of an aggressive monarch with imperial ambitions to a tee.<sup>51</sup>

Kautilya viewed the institution of kingship as an absolute necessity for the maintenance of order in society. He seems to espouse the contract theory of the origin of kingship which is very close to the Buddhists' view. The relevant passage from the

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<sup>49</sup> Arthasāstra, III, 1, trans. Shamasastri, R., Mysore Printing and Publishing House, Mysore, 1967, p. 173. This passage constitutes a formula for success for an ambitious monarch. If all these ingredients are combined by a king, a condition of overlordship results. Dharma is given first place in the list because it was considered to be the most important and indispensable ingredient in the formula.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Saleatore, op. cit., pp. 187-188.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

Arthaśāstra reads as follows:

People suffering from anarchy as illustrated by the proverbial tendency of a large fish swallowing a small one (matsyanyabhibutah prajah) first elected Manu, the Vaiṣvata, to be their king; and allotted one-sixth of the grains grown and one-tenth of merchandise as sovereign dues. Fed by this payment, kings took upon themselves the responsibility of maintaining safety and security of their subjects, and of being answerable for the sins of their subjects when the principle of levying just punishments and taxes had been violated. Hence hermits, too, provide the king with one-sixth of the grains gleaned by them, thinking that "it is a tax payable to him who protects us". It is the king in whom the duties of both Indra (the rewarder) and Yama (the punisher) are blended and he is the visible dispenser of punishments and rewards; whoever disregards kings will be visited with divine punishments, too. Hence kings shall never be despised.<sup>52</sup>

The context of this passage in the Arthaśāstra indicates that the above message on kingship was designed to be preached by the king's agents throughout the land. It presents two reasons for the general populace to support and obey their king. The first reason is based on the fact that the king is their protector and without him the world would be reduced to anarchy. Therefore, even the hermits and ascetics who live outside the bounds of ordinary society offer the king one-

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<sup>52</sup> Arthaśāstra, I, 13, 23. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

sixth of their gatherings in return for the protection he affords them. The second reason for obeying the king is based on the consequences of not obeying him. If one is foolish enough to disregard the king, Kautilya argues, he will be subjected to "divine punishments". The common individual had little choice in the matter: it was obey or suffer the consequences. Kautilya suggested that this proclamation be read by the king's agents at places of pilgrimage, assemblies, or wherever a large number of people congregate.<sup>53</sup>

Kautilya made use of the king's agents as promoters of the king and kingship in general because he placed a very high priority on public opinion. He felt that a successful king must have the whole-hearted backing of his people. He wrote: "Disloyal or indifferent subjects will endeavor to destroy even a strong king".<sup>54</sup> Conversely, even a weak king who has the loyalty, support, and respect of his people will be able to overcome adversity when it strikes.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it makes sense to promote the king's image in the eyes of the people.

Another reason for promoting the king's image was the belief that the people will imitate their ruler. If they believe that he is virtuous, disciplined, and energetic, they will act in the same manner.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., VII, 5. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., p. 307.

<sup>55</sup> Loc. cit.

As Kautilya states in the first book of the Arthasāstra:

If a king is energetic, his subjects will be equally energetic. If he is reckless, they will not only be reckless likewise, but also eat into his works.<sup>56</sup> Hence the king shall ever be wakeful.

The idea that the people are dependent on the virtue of their king was prevalent in ancient India.<sup>57</sup> However, the related idea that the weather and the fertility of the land are also dependent on the virtue of the king is not found in the Arthasāstra.

The king was required to be personally involved in religious matters within his kingdom.<sup>58</sup> He was required to be especially accommodating to members of the Brahman class who were considered to be gods in human form.<sup>59</sup> Kautilya declares that Brahmins are immune from physical punishment.<sup>60</sup> On the positive side, Kautilya acknowledges the duty of the king to be generous to Brahmins. The northern portion of the king's city should be reserved for the houses of Brahmins and deities.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, deserving Brahmins should be given special lands:

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., I, 19. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Bhagavadgītā, III, vs. 21-24.

<sup>58</sup> Arthasāstra, I, 19, 39. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., p. 38: "He (the king) shall, therefore, personally attend to the business of the gods, of heretics, of Brahmins learned in the Vedas, of cattle, of sacred places, of minors, the aged, the afflicted, and the helpless, and of women..."

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., XIV, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., IV, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., II, 4.

Those who perform sacrifices (rtvik), spiritual guides, priests, and those learned in the Vedas shall be granted Brahmadeya lands yielding sufficient produce and exempted from taxes and fines.<sup>62</sup>

In return for this generosity and respect, the Brahmins helped to strengthen the king's authority and aided in the administration of the state.<sup>63</sup>

The treatment of Brahmins in Kautilya's state was basically the same treatment that the Dharmasūtras allowed them. Yet, Kautilya also used them in ways which are not mentioned in the Dharmasūtras. He suggests that the king use special agents or spies posing as Brahmins or ascetics for espionage.<sup>64</sup> Those agents should be used to help promote the belief that the king possesses superhuman faculties such as omniscience.<sup>65</sup> They should also state that the king has the ability to associate with the gods.<sup>66</sup> It is passages such as these which led Professor Ghoshal to the conclusion that Kautilya advocated the "exploitation of popular superstitions for political ends."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., II, 1. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., p. .

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Drekmeir, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>64</sup> Arthasāstra, I, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., II, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., XII, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 132



This aspect of the Arthasāstra sets it apart from the works on dharma. Kautilya uses religion to strengthen the king's power rather than to limit or counterbalance it.

As mentioned before, Kautilya was concerned with the acquisition and administration of an empire of very large proportions. One of the topics he addresses in the Arthasāstra is the way to conduct a successful conquest of another kingdom, a necessary step on the road to empire. He discusses five different methods for bringing down a rival king: creating disaffection (upajapa); destroying the king by secret tactics (yogavamana); use of spies in the rival kingdom (apasarpa); siege (paryupasana); and, assault (avamarda).<sup>68</sup> Only the last two of these five methods are actually military operations; the others involve various acts of subterfuge against the enemy. He discusses many devious ways of luring a rival king to a deserted spot in order to murder him.<sup>69</sup> Kautilya is also very ruthless in his recommendations for military conquest. He advocates total destruction of the enemies' crops and vital supplies.<sup>70</sup> It is significant that at no point in his discussion of conquest does Kautilya offer any reasons or justifications

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<sup>68</sup> Arthasāstra, XIII, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., XIII, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., XIII, 4.

for warfare. Apparently, it was the idea of universal kingship which served as the justification of warfare against neighbouring kingdoms. To Kautilya, this end was so valuable and desirable that it justified all means including trickery.

In the Arthaśāstra, three distinct types of conquerors are discussed. These are: the dharma-vijayin (righteous conqueror); the lobha-vijayin (greedy conqueror); and, the asura-vijayin (demonic conqueror).<sup>71</sup> The first type of conqueror is satisfied with the surrender of the rival king. The second type is satisfied with the seizure of the rival's land and money. The third type is the most bloodthirsty for he takes everything including the lives of his rival and his people. It should be noted here that Kautilya's use of the term dharma-vijayin is not the same as the use of the term in Buddhist sources. For the Buddhists, a dharma-vijaya conquest consists of the successful spread of the Buddha's dhamma without recourse to violence. For Kautilya, on the other hand, a dharma-vijaya is a military conquest conducted according to the principle of dharma. It is a conquest which tradition has deemed just, although there is no avoidance of violence and warfare in the course of the conquest. The dharma-vijayin is a true empire-builder whereas the asura-vijayin is a plunderer. The true nature of a conqueror is determined after he has defeated his enemy.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., XII, 1. It is significant that the most despicable type of conqueror, the asura-vijayin, is named for the vedic gods' great adversaries the asuras.

The dharma-vijayin would be the most successful in incorporating the new territory for he would have done the least to alienate the inhabitants of that land.

Once a kingdom has been conquered, the victorious monarch must immediately set about a program of pacification. As noted previously, Kautilya places great importance on the loyalty of the people to the king. In order to gain the loyalty and respect of the people in the conquered territory, Kautilya prescribes certain measures which the king should take. The relevant passage below reveals Kautilya's concern with the virtue and benevolence of the king in the eyes of the populace:

Having acquired a new territory, he should cover the enemy's vices with his own virtues, and the enemy's virtues by doubling his own virtues, by strict observance of his own duties, by attending to his works, by bestowing rewards, by remitting taxes, by giving gifts, and by bestowing honours....He should follow the people in their faith with which they celebrate their national, religious and congregational festivals or amusements.<sup>72</sup>

Kautilya was opposed to the imposition of a foreign religion on the conquered people. He goes as far as to advocate that the conquering king assume the same dress and language as the conquered people.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., XIII, 5. trans. Shamastry, op. cit., p. 448.

<sup>73</sup> Loc. cit.

This section of the Arthaśāstra also contains a significant rule for maintaining the customs (charita) of the new territory. He advises the king to do away with those customs which are contrary to righteousness (dharma) but to retain the customs which are righteous even if these customs are different than those observed in the conqueror's homeland.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the newly incorporated kingdom would have a degree of autonomy according to Kautilya's schema. They would have to recognize the overlordship of the emperor, but afterward they would be allowed to retain some of their former independence.

In an effort to summarize Kautilya's view of kingship, three related aspects of the view will be discussed below. First, we must define the meaning of dharma in the Arthaśāstra, for Kautilya's understanding of this concept had a pronounced affect on his understanding of kingship and the role of the king in society. Next, we will discuss the notion of kingdom as it is found in the Arthaśāstra. And, finally, we will consider the question of the king's divinity, if any, in the Arthaśāstra.

(a.) Dharma, law and duty, is the dominating factor in Kautilya's view of kingship. It is integrally allied with the term danda, "the stick" representing punishment and authority. It is danda which serves to uphold dharma, and since the king is the wielder

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<sup>74</sup>Loc. cit.

of the danḍa, he has a great responsibility in regard to dharma.

According to the Arthaśāstra, the three vedas determine dharma for the four classes of society.<sup>75</sup> The three vedas he refers to as sources of dharma are the Rg, Sama, and Yajus. In addition to outlining the duties of the four classes, Kautilya also discusses the duties that pertain to the four stages of life: the student, the householder, the forest recluse, and the ascetic.<sup>76</sup> In his comments on this topic it is clear that Kautilya is following the rules laid down in the Dharmasūtras.

Beyond the particular dharma of an individual, Kautilya speaks of a dharma which is common to all men regardless of their class or stage in life. This dharma consists of harmlessness, truthfulness, purity, freedom from spite, abstinence from cruelty, and forgiveness.<sup>77</sup>

These general duties are strongly reminiscent of the dhamma proclaimed in the inscriptions of the Emperor Aśoka, and this raises the question of the true origins of Aśoka's precepts.<sup>78</sup> In sum, Kautilya recognizes

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., I, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., I, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Saletore, op. cit., p. 489: "Without controverting the fact that Emperor Aśoka was a Buddhist, we may question whether in the 'sum of moral values' which he is supposed to have proclaimed, ... there was anything new which had not been known or propounded by the Hindus centuries before his time. The fact that Aśoka admits that the rule which he proclaimed was an ancient one, suggests that we have to go to the earlier Hindus for the concept of moral values."

at least three related types of dharma: class dharma (varṇadharmā), life-stage dharma (aśramadharmā), and a universal dharma which consists of duties common to all.

The role of the king in regard to dharma is very clear-cut: he must never allow people to swerve from their distinctive dharma in life.<sup>79</sup> Here, again, Kautilya is relying on the Dharmasūtras which hold that the dharma of the king is to insure that the dharma of each member of society is adhered to in the traditional manner prescribed by the vedas.<sup>80</sup> Thus, dharma, according to Kautilya, does not signify religion per se, although religion is definitely a factor in it. It is an immensely broad term which signifies the force of tradition in the order of society, including the occupational structure of society. Even duties which appear to be very mundane, such as simply doing one's job, actually have a certain religious significance on the broad scale of dharma. For, as Kautilya states:

The observance of one's own duty (dharma)  
leads one to Svarga [heaven] and infinite  
bliss (anantya).<sup>81</sup>

The righteous conquest of territory (dharmavijaya) in the course of empire-building should not be conceived of as a "holy war"

<sup>79</sup> Arthasāstra, I, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Gautama, XI, 9-10

<sup>81</sup> Arthasāstra, I, 3, 8.

or the conquest of truth over falsehood. By no means does Kautilya view his king as a religious crusader. Rather, he advises the king to let the conquered land retain its religion and customs. It was understood, however, that the dharma structure of society would be promoted in the new territory by members of the Brahman class who would be granted lands and villages by the king. This last point leads directly into a consideration of the significance of kingdom (rāstra) in the Arthaśāstra.

(b.) The kingdom is one of the central elements of sovereignty recognized by Kautilya. The other elements are: the king, the minister, the fort, the treasury, the army, the friend, and the enemy.<sup>82</sup> Kautilya is very exact on the characteristics of a desirable kingdom. In his description of such a kingdom, Kautilya envisions a smoothly running, agriculturally-based, urban civilisation:

Possessed of capital cities both in the center and the extremities of the kingdom, productive of subsistence not only to its own people, but also to outsiders on occasions of calamities, repulsive to enemies, powerful enough to put down neighbouring kings, free from miry, rocky, uneven, and desert tracts, as well as from conspirators, tigers, wild beasts, and large tracts of wilderness, beautiful to look at, containing fertile lands, mines, timber, and elephant

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., VI, 1.

forests, and pasture grounds,...full of cattle, not depending upon rain for water, possessed of land and waterways, rich in various kinds of commercial articles, capable of bearing the burden of a vast army, and heavy taxation, inhabited by agriculturists of good and active character, full of intelligent masters and servants, and with a population noted for its loyalty and character - these are the qualities of a good country.<sup>83</sup>

Kautilya's king stands at the center of a group of 12 kings, called mandala.<sup>84</sup> He conducts his policies and plans on the basis of the political complexities of the mandala, overthrowing weak kings and making peace with the powerful ones. Kautilya evaluates a good kingdom on the basis of very practical concerns such as a good water supply and fertile land. Unlike some of the other sources that will be considered in another chapter, he does not speak of the earth as a goddess, nor does he personify the earth as a beautiful woman. He does not call the king the husband of the earth. This is characteristic of Kautilya's thought, for he consciously or unconsciously demythologizes the subject of kingship.

(c.) The king stands at the head of Kautilya's list of the elements of sovereignty. He views the king as a practical necessity for the realization of both dharma and kingdom. With such a significant

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., VI, 1. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., p. 290.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., VI, 2. For a discussion of the mandala theory, cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 94.



position, it seems likely that Kautilya would deify the monarch and thus give him a supernatural source of authority. However, this is not the case. As we have noted, Kautilya accepted the contract theory which argues that the first king was elected by the people for their protection and given a percentage of their produce as payment for his services. This view is contrary to the divine creation theory according to which the first king was created by God for the preservation of mankind. The implication of Kautilya's view of the origin of kingship is that the king is a very high and powerful wage-earner in society. He is a hard-working, shrewd man with driving ambition, but he is not a demi-god or incarnation of God. Yet, as we have seen, there are times in the Arthasāstra when Kautilya advocates that the people be told that their king has supernatural faculties and associates with the gods. Professor Kane has given a reasonable explanation of such inconsistencies which occur in many of the ancient sources on kingship. He believes that one must analyse the intended audience for any statement about the king. If the audience is the general public, the statement will speak of the king as divine, possessing supernatural faculties, etc. On the other hand, if the statement is directed to the king and his advisors, it will skip the mythological and supernatural overtones and generally stick to the practicalities of power.<sup>85</sup> This is the case

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Kane, op. cit., vol. III, p. 27.

with the Arthaśāstra, for it was intended as a text for kings and their ministers. Thus, there may well have been a double-standard of views on kingship in ancient India: those intended for popular consumption and those intended for the esoteric circle at the hub of royal power.<sup>86</sup>

When the Buddhist and Arthaśāstra views on kingship are compared, we find that they agree on a number of points and disagree on others. On points of agreement, both the Buddhists and Kautilya agree that kingship is a necessary institution for mankind, and that it appeared as a result of a contract made between the people and the first king. The opposite of kingship is anarchy, a condition which both traditions deplore. Moreover, they agree that a successful king must possess all the elements of kingship and that he must be a well-educated individual who is capable of great self-control. According to both traditions, the king has a responsibility to support and spread dharma, but it is at this point that we encounter a disagreement for they understood the term dharma differently.

According to the Arthaśāstra, dharma is determined on the basis of the Vedas.<sup>87</sup> The Vedas were thought to be the source and

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<sup>86</sup> In this thesis, we are primarily concerned with the popular views of kingship and their religious ramifications. Such a dicotomy between exoteric and esoteric views is a universal factor in political affairs. Present day politicians have their "image-makers" just as their predecessors did.

<sup>87</sup> Arthaśāstra, I, 3.

and justification of the traditional four-fold order of society which sprang from an act of divine creation. The Buddhists, on the other hand, did not accept the authority of the Vedas as revelation or as the source for determining dharma. Their view of dharma centered around the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddhists' understanding of dharma had very little to do with varnadharma, or class duties. Rather, it consisted of a doctrine of universal morality applicable to all people of all castes and levels of society. The Buddhists could not agree with Kautilya's statement that the proper performance of one's dharma will lead one to heaven and infinite bliss. It was not heaven (svarga) but nirvāṇa, enlightenment and cessation of suffering, which was the goal of the Buddhists, caste duties cannot help one in search of nirvāṇa.

While both the Buddhist and the Arthaśāstra monarchs are charged with the duty of promoting dharma within their realm, the means employed to achieve this end differ considerably. The Buddhist monarch is much more of a preacher and teacher than his Arthaśāstra counterpart. He is likened, as we have seen, to the Buddha and the Buddha is likened to a cakkavatti. His conquests are grounded in spiritual merit and represent a spread of true morality throughout the kingdoms of India. In contrast, the Arthaśāstra monarch relies on his powerful army in order to further his campaign for universal overlordship. This type of king is not a particularly religious or saintly character. As Gokhale has said of the Arthaśāstra type king: "He

wears no halo, and no nimbus of divine glory surrounds him."<sup>88</sup>

The Emperor Aśoka is a good historical illustration of the difference between the Buddhist and the Arthaśāstra views on kingship. During the first part of his career as the Mauryan emperor, up to and including his bloody conquest of Kalinga (Orissa), Aśoka followed the Arthaśāstra view of kingship including conquest for the sake of conquest. It was after the conquest of Kalinga had been completed that Aśoka converted to Buddhism. In Rock Edict XIII, Asoka expresses his deep remorse for the bloodshed and death caused by this war. Moreover, he made a resolution to avoid recourse to warfare and violence and to use his remaining years on earth for the promotion of righteousness (dharma) in his empire and beyond its boundaries. As we have noted, the type of righteousness he promoted through his inscriptions and dharma-agents was very similar to Kautilya's list of duties common to all men. However, the whole tenor of Aśoka's pronouncements on warfare and the humility he expresses through the inscriptions is decidedly different from what one would expect of an Arthaśāstra king. There is an undeniable connection between the remorse that Asoka felt over the carnage in Kalinga and his conversion to Buddhism. It is this sort of radical change in perspectives which characterizes the difference

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<sup>88</sup> Gokhale, J.B. "Hindu and Buddhist Political Traditions", op. cit., p. 216.

between the Buddhist and Arthaśāstra ideas of kingship.

Both the Buddhist and the Arthaśāstra sources on kingship tell us something about the evolving nature of kingship in India. The warlord type king of the Vedas was a thing of the past by the third and fourth centuries B.C. He had been replaced by the ideal of emperor and empire. The concept of a single political unity which stretched from sea to sea is not found in the vedic sources, but it had become a reality by the time of Aśoka. This change had profound implications for theories of kingship. Kautilya, the great political realist, argues that such an empire must be based on a firm foundation of wealth and power. His state is essentially a greatly expanded version of the smaller aryan kingdoms that existed in the late vedic age. That is, his state is based on the same social order and authority structure as the vedic rāstras. The Buddhists saw the potential of empires from a different vantage-point. They felt that an empire could and should become a dharma realm, "a realm of innocence", ruled by a cakkavatti who is nothing short of a cosmocrator.<sup>89</sup> Neither wealth nor power, but righteousness provides the firm foundation for this dharma realm. It is integrally allied with the message of the founder of Buddhism. The Buddha played down the importance of caste and social status and emphasised man's capacity to overcome suffering by following the path taught by the Buddha. The two views of kingship presented in this chapter thus represent two different responses to the new political vistas which appeared in the post-vedic age.

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Reynolds, op. cit., p. 20.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### EPIC VIEWS OF KINGSHIP

The epic sources on kingship are of a different character than the sources considered thus far. The Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa were and continue to be extremely popular works in India. Although they are not considered to be equal to the Vedas in religious authority, they are considered to be inspired works of the smṛti ("remembered") class of sacred literature. Unlike the Dharmaśāstras and the Arthaśāstra, the epics are made up of numerous stories centered around a common theme. One of the major themes of both epics is kingship, a subject they handle in a rambling, rather unsystematic, fashion. During the broad period in which they were composed by many hands, c. 600 B.C. to 400 A.D., far-reaching changes had taken place in the Indian understanding of king and kingdom, changes which were discussed in the preceding chapter. As we shall see, the epics responded to the new political vistas in their own special manner, incorporating both the Buddhist and Arthaśāstra viewpoints and ultimately reaching an understanding which is more than the sum of its parts. Although each epic has its own distinctive interpretation, it is clear that they agree on a number of questions about kingship. This agreement is especially apparent in regard to the standard of ideal kingship that is presented in the epics. The great kings of the epics exhibit common characteristics which make them appear to

be modeled after the same prototype. It is the task of this chapter to define and discuss this type and show its importance for the history of kingship. This discussion will serve as background material for our future discussion of the Guptas and their relation to the ideal type.

At various points in both the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, the merits and demerits of kingship are debated. An excellent example of this is Bhīṣma's long monologue on rājadharmā which appears in the Śānti parvan of the Mahābhārata. Underlying these debates and tales of legendary kings of the past there is a deep concern for the contemporary political scene in India at the time the epics were composed. That is, the epics were used, in part, as a vehicle for political theorizing.<sup>1</sup>

It should be stated at the outset that the view of kingship to be considered in this chapter is not entirely novel, nor does it claim to be. It is, in fact, based on the earlier vedic views, modified by the Buddhist emphasis on the compassionate monarch. The novel elements in the view, such as the supreme importance of the god Viṣṇu, are passed off as part of an eternal doctrine of kingship for the aryan people. This lends them the honored sanction of tradition. In addition,

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Ruben, W., "Indra's Fight against Vṛtra in the Mahābhārata", Belvalkar Felicitation Volume, ed. Radhakrishnan et al, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1957. p. 120.

the bulk of the earlier duties of the king, i.e. sacrifice, protection of the people, support for Brahmins, are implicitly accepted in the epic view to be considered. While the very nature of this view purports to be conservative, both the origin of the institution of kingship and the king's ultimate basis of authority are re-interpreted and considerably altered in the epics. The elaborations and re-interpretations are extensive enough that one is justified in calling this epic view a new conception of the role of a king.<sup>2</sup> Yet we must bear in mind that it is a new conception built on an old foundation.

This chapter will commence with a discussion of kingship in the Sānti Parva of the Mahābhārata. This section of the great epic contains the dialogue of Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira on the subject of kingship (rājadharmā). Special attention will be paid to the story of King Prthu, which is told by Bhīṣma in order to explain the origin of kingship and the reason why one man is able to rule over a multitude of men. This story, though set in the distant past, has a great deal

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Hopkins, E.W., "The Divinity of Kings", JAOS, Vol. LI, 1931, p. 313. In Professor Ghoshal's estimation, this epic view is not so much a "new" conception as an extensive and intensive development of the older lines of political thought (i.e., smṛti and Arthasāstra traditions). Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 189. It is mainly in the area of the king's authority and the quasi-divine status of kingship that this view differs from earlier traditions. Ghoshal claims that this is the "utmost development" of the doctrine of the king's divine creation, while Hopkins tends to see it as a new development. I take the stand that it is new in-so-far as the role of the god Viṣṇu differs from the earlier views. This standpoint will be further argued in this chapter:



of relevance for the institution of monarchy at the time the Mahābhārata was composed, for Bhīshma uses the story to explain the authority of every righteous king. After a discussion of the significance of the Prthu story, we shall focus on the story of King Rāma. The Rāmāyana does not contain an extended theoretical examination of rajadharma as is found in the Sānti Parva. The life of Rāma itself, however, is a lengthy description of ideal kingship which agrees in essence with the theories expounded by Bhīshma. The most systematic exposition of kingship in the Rāmāyana is contained in Rāma's conversation with his brother Bhārata when the latter visits Rāma in exile. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the relevance of this highly glorified conception of kingship in the political life of ancient India.

Prior to examining the ideal kings of this chapter, a word should be said about the general status of kingship (rajadharma) in the epics. Although disparaging remarks about kings and kingship can be found in both epics, the general impressions given in the works is highly favourable. Kingship is frequently contrasted with its opposite, anarchy, which is considered an impossible condition for mankind. Anarchy (matsyanyaya) is called the greatest possible evil in the Mahābhārata,<sup>3</sup> and this view is repeated many times

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<sup>3</sup> Mhb., XII, 67.

throughout the epics. Opposed to the disorder of anarchy is the sacred order of society which is enforced by the king. Kings are said to protect their subjects as parents protect their children.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Viṣṇu is quoted as saying: "Kshatriya duties are the foremost of all duties. Those eternal duties, regarded as the first in the world, embrace the protection of every creature. Themselves eternal, they lead to eternal emancipation."<sup>5</sup> The very context of this and other favourable statements about kingship indicates that there were still major questions to be resolved about kingship in the epics. Thus, Viṣṇu gives the above in answer to King Māndhātṛi's uncertainty about the highest duty for a man. Moreover, the greater portion of the entire Santi Parva consists of Bhīṣhma's assurances to Yudhisthira on the value and necessity of rājadharmā. The epics offer an affirmation and elevation of the king and kingship which is more positive than the previous works on the subject. As Professor Ghoshal has commented on Bhīṣhma's discussion of rājadharmā: "Rājadharmā, we are told in effect, is the fundamental social and political principle ensuring complete fulfilment of human ends as well as universal security...."<sup>6</sup> Kingship, in the epics, is placed in a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., XII, 64, Cf. Aśoka's statement: "All men are my children." (Jaugada edict) Hultzsch, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., XII, 64. trans. Roy, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 191.

cosmic and eternal context. It is said to be an institution created by the divine Lord of all creatures after he had created the universe.<sup>7</sup> This view is in agreement with the late vedic concept of the divine creation of the social order.<sup>8</sup> It is this association which provides kingship with its ultimate validity.

Each of the kings to be examined in this chapter has a history which precedes the epics by an indeterminable length of time. However, both Prthu and Rāma take on a new significance in the epics when they are identified with the god Viṣṇu. This identification probably occurred in the later stages of both the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, and it may be precisely dated at c. 2nd century B.C. to c. 3rd century A.D.,. When a new understanding of kingship was developed in the epics, well-known royal figures of the past were used to illustrate the doctrine. As noted above, the novel elements in the doctrine were accorded the status of eternal truths, and there is no hint that innovations are taking place. Kings who appeared as mortals in earlier stories are called gods and incarnations of Viṣṇu in the epics. These reappraisals of ancient kings were part of a larger reappraisal of the institution of kingship which occurred at this time. We shall return to this point at the close of this chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> Mhb., XII, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rgveda, X, 90.

Bhīṣma recounts a version of the story of King Prthu in order to explain the authority of the king to Yudhiṣṭhira. Prthu is actually a very ancient legendary king whose historical existence, if he had any, is a matter of conjecture. The name of King Prthu, or Prthu Vainya, is mentioned at least three times in the Rgveda.<sup>9</sup> In addition, his name appears in the list of the sixteen celebrated monarchs (sodasa-rājika) which is given twice in the Mahābhārata.<sup>10</sup> The fact that he is used as an archetype of kingship in the Mahābhārata is in keeping with his pre-epic character, for he appears as a primordial culture-hero as early as the Atharvaveda.<sup>11</sup>

The story of King Prthu is set in the primordial past of the Kṛta age. Bhīṣma recounts the story of Prthu in answer to Yudhiṣṭhira's question "...for what reason does one man, the king govern the rest of the world numbering many men possessed of great intelligence and bravery?".<sup>12</sup> Bhīṣma begins his answer by saying that originally

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<sup>9</sup>Rgveda, VIII, 9, 10; and, X, 148, 5. Also X, 93, 14

<sup>10</sup>Mhb., VII, 55; and, XII, 29.

<sup>11</sup>Atharvaveda, VIII, 10.

<sup>12</sup>Mhb., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 126.

there was no sovereignty, king, or chastisement.<sup>13</sup> However, with the passage of time, this virtuous state was lost and men fell into error. The vedas then disappeared from view. As a consequence of this disappearance of the vedas, righteousness was lost. At this point, the gods themselves became alarmed and fearful. The gods went to Brahma, who is called the Grandsire of the universe, and asked him to intercede so the universe might not be destroyed. Brahma composed an enormous work of one hundred thousand chapters on the essentials of dharma and the means by which men can be kept on the path of righteousness. This enormous work, it is said, laid the foundations of the science of chastisement, or dandaniti.

In possession of an abridged version of Brahma's work, the gods then went to Viṣṇu and asked him to indicate which man among the mortals was worthy to be the king.<sup>14</sup> Viṣṇu then created a son out of his energy to be king. But, this being, known as Virajas, preferred a life of renunciation to the life of a king and he did not accept the office. This pattern of renunciation was followed by his son and grandson. A successful king was found in Ananga, Virajas' great-grandson, but Ananga's son, named Ativala, became a "slave of his passions". This enslavement,

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<sup>13</sup>It is apparent that in the earliest "blissful" age the institutions of private property, family, and caste did not exist. The Sānti Parva explains the rise of the state and the institution of kingship in relation to the rise of these three elements of civilisation. Kings were created to safeguard these institutions; there would be no need for kings without them. Cf. Sharma, R.S., Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1959, pp. 50-58.

<sup>14</sup>Mbh., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 131.

it will be recalled, constituted the gravest threat to the state in the Arthasāstra. Ativala's reign was a disaster, but the reign of his son and successor Vena was even more disastrous. Vena may well represent the archetype of a totally wicked king.<sup>15</sup> It is said that Vena was "a slave of wrath and malice", a condition even worse than being a slave of passion. As a result of Vena's unrighteousness to all creatures, the Rsis resolved to kill the king. They accomplished their aim by means of sacred grass (kusa grass) which they charmed with mantras.<sup>16</sup> The account of this magical murder is given as follows:

The Rishis, those utterers of Brahma, slew him with Kusa blades (as their weapon) inspired with mantras. Uttering mantras the while, those Rishis pierced the right thigh of Vena. Thereupon, from that thigh, came out a short-limbed person on earth, resembling a charred brand, with blood-red eyes and black hair. Those utterers of Brahma said unto him, "Nishida (sit) here!" From him have sprung the Nishadas, viz. those wicked tribes that have the hills and the forests for their abode, as also those hundreds and thousands of others called Mlechchhas, residing in the Vindhya mountains. The great Rishis then pierced the right arm of Vena. Thence sprang a person who was a second Indra in form. Clad in mail, armed with scimitars,

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<sup>15</sup> Stories of totally wicked kings, the polar opposites of ideal kings, also exerted a great fascination for the people of ancient India. Examples of this type of king are King Duryodhana in the Mahābhārata and King Kalabu in the Jātakas who cuts the Bodhisattva to pieces. Cf. Jātaka Stories, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 26f.

<sup>16</sup> The power of sacred mantras to kill offenders is recognized by Manu, XI, 31. It is said that in this fashion the Brahmins can inflict punishment without soiling their hands.

bows and arrows, and well-versed in the science of weapons, he was fully acquainted with the Vedas and their branches. All the ordinances of the science of chastisement, O king, (in their embodied forms) came to that best of men. The son of Vena then, with joined hands, said unto those great Rishis, "I have attained an understanding that is very keen and that is observant of righteousness. Tell me in detail what I shall do with it. That useful task which you will be pleased to indicate, I shall accomplish it without hesitation. 17

After taking a vow to always observe the dictates of righteousness, maintain the religion of the vedas, and protect the world from the intermixture of castes, King Prthu is crowned by a host of characters including Visnu, Indra, rsis, Brahmins, and the Regents of the World (lokapālas). Following the coronation, King Prthu proceeded to accomplish the tasks of a culture hero for the benefit of mankind. The Mahābhārata credits Prthu with clearing the land for agriculture and shaping the land for man.

It was Prthu who made the terrestrial surface level. In every Manwantara, the earth becomes uneven. Vena's son removed the rocks and rocky masses lying all around, O monarch, with the horn of his bow. By this means the hills and mountains became enlarged. 18

The account goes on to state that since the earth became celebrated during Prthu's reign she came to be called prithivī. 19 This association is significant because it demonstrates the integral relationship

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<sup>17</sup> Mbh., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

that was thought to exist between the earth and the king, even though the etymology of prithivi from Prthu is considered by modern scholars to be "preposterous".<sup>20</sup>

As in the reign of a Buddhist cakkavatti, prosperity and well being filled the earth when Prthu ruled. There is a certain element of nostalgia for the perfect age implicit in the concept of the ideal king. All the troubles that traditionally plague mankind were unheard of at that time. It is said:

At that time there was neither decrepitude, nor famine, nor calamity, nor disease (on earth). In consequence of the protection afforded by that king, nobody had any fear from reptiles and thieves or from any other source. When he proceeded to the sea, the waters used to be solidified. The mountains gave him way, and his standard was never obstructed anywhere. He drew from the earth, as a milcher from a cow, seven and ten kinds of crops for the food of Yakshas, Rakshasas, and Nagas, and other creatures. That high-souled king caused all creatures to regard righteousness as the foremost of all things; and because he gratified all the people, therefore, was he called Rajan.<sup>21</sup>

The reign of King Prthu had a positive effect on all aspects of life.<sup>22</sup> It is a regenerating force which maintains the order and balance of the universe. It seems quite natural that the individual who embodies this

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<sup>20</sup>Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>21</sup>Mbh., op. cit., Vol. VIII, pp. 132-3.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Basham, A.L., "Ancient Indian Kingship", Indica, Vol. 1, No. 2, September 1964. p. 122: "The king, his subjects, the animals, the plants, the land they live in, and even meteorological phenomena form an organic whole. ...They are linked together by the bond of 'karma'. The righteous king produces righteous people. ...The king's merit has an effect upon the whole cosmos. As a result of his good conduct, the crops and herds flourish, rain falls at the right time and during the right time, and in the right quantity, and the river also flows."



force <sup>23</sup> would be deified and associated with the highest principle thought to be active in the universe.

King Prthu's authority was recognized at once by all his subjects, and he consequently had no need of military conquest. It is said that "He who once beheld Prithu's amiable face became obedient to him." <sup>24</sup> Prthu's real basis of authority is divine according to the Śānti Parva account for Lord Viṣṇu established this king and then entered into him. The passage in question is translated as follows:

The eternal Vishnu himself, O Bharata, confirmed his power, telling him, "No one, O king, shall transcend thee." The divine Vishnu entered the body of that monarch in consequence of his penances. For this reason, the entire universe offered divine worship to Prithu, numbered among human gods... What other cause is there in consequence of which the multitude live in obedience to one, save the divinity of the monarch?... A person upon the exhaustion of his merit, comes down from heaven to earth, and takes birth as a king conversant with the science of chastisement. Such a person becomes endued with greatness and is really a portion of Vishnu on earth. He becomes possessed of great intelligence and obtains superiority over others. Established by the gods, no one transcends him. <sup>25</sup>

This passage is of central importance in the study of the Epic ideal of kingship. It clearly states that people obey the king because of

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<sup>23</sup>The word "force" is used here for devarāja which is the permanent principle of kingship, or rājyasāra. On the significance of this term, Cf. Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 61

<sup>24</sup>Mbh., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 133.

<sup>25</sup>Loc. cit.

this divinity which is associated with Visnu. Thus, the king may be called a "temporal avatar", <sup>26</sup> consisting of a portion of Visnu on earth. The stress laid on merit in this passage is very reminiscent of the Buddhist views on kingship.

Concerning the physical appearance of the Epic ideal king as represented by King Prthu, the Santi Parva offers a few interesting details. In the first place, it is stated that Prthu was "a second Indra in form". <sup>27</sup> It is reasonable to suppose that the phrase "a second Indra in form" conjured up a certain mental image in the mind of the recipient of this story. As Professor Banerjea has noted, Indra is one of the best developed anthropomorphic gods in the vedas. <sup>28</sup> There are many references to Indra's manly form, his feet, arms, and fair face. The composite picture of this god calls for a mighty figure, but also handsome and attractive. There are several Rgvedic passages which refer to Indra as susipra, or having beautiful cheeks and jaws. <sup>29</sup> Secondly, Prthu is expressly stated to have had an

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lannoy, R., The Speaking Tree A Study of Indian Culture and Society, Oxford University Press, London, 1971. p. 219. "The chakravartin was a kind of temporal avatar, somewhat resembling the Mahayanist Buddhas and the avatars of Vishnu, born at auspicious times to proclaim the universal empire and righteous government within the grand cosmic scheme."

<sup>27</sup> Mbh., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Banerjea, J.N., The Development of Hindu Iconography, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1956. p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

amiable face which made people obedient to him.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the well-developed physique, youthful charm and amiable face, there is nothing extraordinary about King Prthu. It is stated that he belonged to the "same world" as the multitude.<sup>31</sup> Finally, it is interesting to note the rules of an early Purāṇa on making the image of King Prthu. The Visnudharmottara Purāṇa, which may date from the Gupta age,<sup>32</sup> requires that Prthu's image be made showing the marks of a chakravartin.<sup>33</sup> This is a significant reference, for it points to the fact that the Epic ideal king was represented with the fixed attributes of the chakravartin, Buddhist or pre-Buddhist in origin, in the post-epic period.

Rāma

The story of Rāma as told in the Rāmāyana is the saga of a king who was at the same time a full incarnation from birth of Lord Viṣṇu. This fact of full incarnation distinguishes Rāma from Prthu for the latter was entered by Viṣṇu only after his coronation. In this sense,

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<sup>30</sup> Mbh., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Jaiswal, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>33</sup> Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, trans. Kramrisch, S., University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1929, p. 115.

Rāma's divinity is exceptional. As Hopkins notes, "Rāma remains not merely a great divinity but the supreme deity (esa te daivatam param), whose being embraces all other gods".<sup>34</sup> Rāma is the paramount ideal king in the Epics, representing all the elements of the model to perfection. His being, according to the Rāmāyana, goes beyond his temporal manifestation as the following passage suggests;

Rāma is ever engaged in the welfare of all beings. The Three worlds with their Indras, the Siddhas and the great Rishis, do honour to that great hero and adore him as the supreme Purusha.<sup>35</sup>

As in the case of King Prthu, there is evidence that the "original" character of Rāma underwent a reappraisal or revaluation by a Vaiṣṇava author. There has, of course, been great debate on this subject, but the general consensus of scholarly opinion may be summarized as follows:

...the original Rāmāyana, in which Rama was a human being, was composed by Valmiki in the third or more probably in the fourth century B.C., and that, with the addition of Books I and VII and some passages in other books, it assumed its present form at the end of the second century A.D. when Rama was already deified as an incarnation of Vishnu.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Hopkins, E.W., "The Divinity of Kings", JAOS, Vol. 51, 1931. p. 315.

<sup>35</sup>The Rāmāyana of Valmiki, trans. Shastri, H.P., Shanti-sadan, London, 1962, Vol. III, p. 344.

<sup>36</sup>Majumdar et al, ed., The Age of Imperial Unity, op. cit., p. 254. Some scholars, following Jacobi, argue that the Ramayana is pre-Buddhistic.

In the first kāṇḍa of the Rāmāyana, Viṣṇu is approached by the gods to help in destroying the aśura Ravana. Ravana had been granted a boon by Brahmā that he would be invulnerable to all but a human being. Because the mighty demon had no fear of man, he became arrogant and threatened to destroy the whole world. It is apparent that this situation resembles the pattern of the Pṛthu story: the world is on the brink of destruction and the gods turn to Viṣṇu who must somehow enter the world of humanity in order to rectify matters.

Viṣṇu became incarnate as Rāma through a normal human birth. The impregnation, however, was preternatural. His mother, Queen Kaushalya, had eaten consecrated food containing the seed which had been brought down from heaven. His father King Daśaratha and Queen Kaushalya had been selected by Viṣṇu as the "parents" of his human incarnation because of the king's great store of merit.<sup>37</sup> Without going into the numerous details of Rāma's story, contained in the 24,000 ślokas of the Rāmāyana, I shall concentrate on those aspects of Rama which relate to the Epic concept of perfect kingship.

At birth, it is said, Rāma clearly bore the marks of a great man. The following description of the baby Rāma is given in the Rāmāyana:

Then the world-honored Lord of the Universe, endowed with divine attributes, Shri Ramachandra, was born of the womb of Kaushalya, he, promoter of the glory

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<sup>37</sup>The selection of a royal house on the basis of the merit of the king and the queen is similar to the early Mahāyāna accounts of the Buddha's selection of King Suddhodana and Queen Maya, as given in the Lalitavistara. Since the last recension of the Rāmāyana and the Lalitavistara are roughly contemporaneous, it is possible that there was some interaction between the two traditions on this point.

—of the house of Ikshvaku, adorned with divine marks, a portion of the blessed Lord Visnu having reddened eyes, long arms, crimson lips, a voice like a gong and of immeasurable glory, and by his lustre, he enhanced the beauty of Kaushalya, as did that of the God of a Thousand eyes the beauty of Aditi. <sup>38</sup>

In this brief description, there is evidence to assert that Rama conformed to the acknowledged attributes of a great man, or the mahāpurusa-laksana. Among these signs of greatness, which total 112 in number (32 major signs and 80 subsidiary signs), are found long arms, red lips, and a voice like the-bellowing of an elephant or the rolling of the clouds. <sup>39</sup> One of Rāma's most important attributes in the epic are his long arms. In Indian kingship in general, long arms on a ruler have a very meaningful symbolic significance. <sup>40</sup>

Like King Prthu, Rāma is said to possess an amiable face which the people take delight in admiring. His face is compared to the beauty of the full moon. <sup>41</sup> The sight of Rāma is said to be enough to dispel all sadness from the heart of the viewer and restore happiness. <sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Rāmāyana, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> For a list of these marks, see Foucher, A., Life of the Buddha, Wesleyan University Press, Middleton, 1963, p. 258.

<sup>40</sup> Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> Rāmāyana, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 159.

<sup>42</sup> Loc. cit.

The people's allegiance to Rāma is automatic and natural: "Resplendent as the sun of glorious rays, Rāma shone by his virtues, which made him dear to all and delighted his sire."<sup>43</sup>

As one would expect of a divine model, Rāma's virtues are infinite. In the following description of his character, a special emphasis is placed on his gentleness and compassion:

Endowed with beauty and valour, a stranger to envy, without rival on earth, equal in virtue to Dasaratha whose son he was, tranquil of soul, speaking soft words to all, never returning a harsh answer when treated with contumely, rendered happy by any service done to him, forgetting every offence offered, Ramachandra was wholly master of himself. Even in the exercise of military science, he sought out those eminent in wisdom or people of learning or the aged or virtuous. Wise and generous, he was the first to address others, using affectionate terms, and he was supremely courageous yet sought no personal advantage through his powers. He never uttered a lie and paid due honour to erudite and elderly persons. Gentle, restraining his wrath, devoted to the brahmins, compassionate for his subjects, who were devoted to him.<sup>44</sup>

This description is more than just a description of an ideal king, it is also a description of an ideal person in any walk of life. According to Kautilya and others, the king's character determines the character of his subjects.<sup>45</sup> Rāma exemplified the desired qualities which all Hindus should strive to attain.

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<sup>43</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 157-8.

<sup>45</sup>Kautilya's Arthasāstra, op. cit., p. 354. "...of what kind the king's character is, of the same kind will be the character of his people; for their progress or downfall, the people depend upon the king...".

The virtues of the ideal king are held to have manifold consequences, all of them beneficial, for the people and the land. The fruits of Rāma's reign are summarized as follows in the Rāmāyana:

Reigning for ten thousand years, he offered up ten horse sacrifices, distributing immense wealth in charity, and Rama, whose arms reached to his knees, the powerful elder brother of Lakshmana, ruled the earth in glory and performed many sacrifices with his sons, brothers and kinsfolk. No widow was ever found in distress nor was there any danger from snakes or disease during his reign; there were no malefactors in his kingdom nor did any suffer harm; no aged person ever attended the funeral of a younger relative; happiness was universal; each attended to his duty and they had only to look on Rama to give up enmity. Men lived for a thousand years, each having a thousand sons who were free from infirmity and anxiety; trees bore fruit and flowers perpetually; Parjanya sent down rain when it was needed and Maruta blew auspiciously; all works undertaken bore happy results and all engaged in their respective duties and eschewed evil. All were endowed with good qualities; all were devoted to pious observances and Rama ruled over the kingdom for ten thousand years. <sup>46</sup>

The description given of Rāma's reign is essentially a description of the Kṛta age, the first age of the world during which perfection existed on earth. It is remarkable that it was all thought to hinge on the king. If an ideal king occupies the throne, the perfect age is created on earth. Although this view would seem to contradict the mechanical degeneration of the yugas, <sup>47</sup> it is clearly stated in the Mahābhārata that the king can turn back the clock, so to speak:

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<sup>46</sup> Rāmāyana, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 370.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Manu, I, 68-86.



The respective ages called Krita, Treta, Dwapara, and Kali, O bull of Bharata's race, are all dependent on the conduct of the king. It is the king who constitutes the age. <sup>48</sup>

Thus, the ideal king of the Epics is very closely allied with the concept of an earthly utopia in which men all live long and complete lives free from fear of pre-mature death. The idea of the Krita age and a possible return to it under the leadership of a perfect monarch is a dominant feature in post-epic kingship. In the Gupta inscriptions, for example, the Krita age is referred to a number of times, and kings are spoken of as acquiring "...an eminent reputation by clearing out the blocked-up path of the kings of the Krita age". <sup>49</sup> This view that perfection existed in the past rather than the future was destined to have a profound effect on the institution of kingship in India. <sup>50</sup>

Taken as a whole, the above passages on kingship drawn from the epics agree on a general view of kingship and its relation to society. This view is a composite one to the extent that it incorporates elements of the vedic, arthasāstric, and Buddhist understandings of kingship. Yet, we have seen that it is far from being a mere recapitulation of previous doctrines. On the contrary, it deserves to be

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<sup>48</sup> Mhb., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 208.

<sup>49</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>50</sup> Lannoy, op. cit., p. 225. "Administration by the king never consciously and avowedly aimed at creating a new social organism, it only claimed to restore good law (dharma) or mend special abuses. The king looked more towards an ideal past than towards an earthly future...".

treated as a separate view in its own right. The authors of the epics were selective in their use of older traditions, and they were clearly aiming at a new understanding of kingship. We will now attempt to draw the themes of this chapter together in order to outline and summarize the epic view of kingship.

(a.) Dharma. In the epics, dharma is closely allied with the king and the institution of kingship. A perfect king was thought to embody dharma in human form. The abstract quality of dharma is also personified in the Mahābhārata as the husband of Śrī, the goddess of royalty, and the product of their union was artha, material well-being and prosperity.<sup>51</sup> Śrī was also thought to be the divine wife of the king, and she is able to make the earthly king into an embodiment of dharma. The idea that the king was identical with dharma is pervasive in the epics. A prime example of this fact is the character of Yudhisthira in the Mahābhārata.

The epics make a connection between dharma, kingship and Lord Viṣṇu. The presence of Viṣṇu distinguishes the epic view from the earlier views. Kingship, or rajadharma, is most essential to dharma in general, for it protects and maintains order. It was the first dharma according to a passage spoken by Viṣṇu in the Mahābhārata:

Kingly duties first flowed from the original god.  
Other duties flowed afterwards from his body.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mhb., XII, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., XII, 64.

Dharma is the key to the quality of a particular age, and the king is the embodiment of dharma. Therefore, the age depended on the righteousness of the king. The king is held responsible for the conduct of his people by the authors of the epics. Through righteousness, a king could bring about the moral perfection of the first age (kṛta yuga) and ~~thus~~ reverse the cycle of time. Or, through unrighteousness, he could plunge his land and people deeper into the moral anarchy of the kali yuga. When Rāma questions his brother Bhārata on the conditions of the kingdom, it is interesting to note the number of times he asks about the practice of religion in the land as if all else depended upon it. Thus, he asks if the royal sacrifices are being performed; if the chief Brahman of the realm is duly honoured; if the king pays homage to the gods, ancestors and gurus; if the city is rich in altars and sanctuaries; if the Brahmins proclaim the king to be their refuge; etc..<sup>53</sup> This passage, along with many others like it, indicates that the king was expected to play an active role in the promotion of dharma within the kingdom. As Bhīṣma succinctly states:

A king should, therefore, advance the cause of righteousness.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rāmāyana, II, 100.

<sup>54</sup> Mhb., XII, 90.

(b.) Kingdom. The kingdom is not a limited mass of land in the epics. It is an ever expanding region of dharma. Conquest and expansion of the kingdom are not only a right of the king, they are his duty. Bhīṣma repeatedly speaks of the benefits of conquest both for the king and for all the people involved. He also states that the newly conquered lands should be given over to learned Brahmins.<sup>55</sup> The final gift of the land to Brahmins would seem to sanctify the conquest and win the king boundless merit.

As was the case with dharma, there are passages in the epics which connect the concept of kingdom with the god Viṣṇu. Certain kings in the Mahābhārata, such as King Vasu -Uparichara, are said to have won sovereignty over the entire world as a direct result of a boon granted by Viṣṇu.<sup>56</sup> This righteous monarch offered all his possessions to Viṣṇu and viewed his kingdom not as his own property, but as the property of Viṣṇu. Here we have the germ of the idea that the kingdom belongs to god, and the king is his devoted servant. The idea that Viṣṇu is the ultimate owner of the land was well-known in the epics and it also appears in many inscriptions. A significant phrase from the Śānti Parva was often quoted verbatim in land grants of the Gupta age.

It states:

As gold is born of Fire and cows are born of the sun, so Earth belongs to Viṣṇu, so that he who gives these three gives the three worlds.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., XII, 73.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., XII, 336.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., XII, 200.

It is possible that this view of divine ownership of the land may have acted as an added inducement for a king to undertake a territorial conquest, for he could claim that he is reasserting Viṣṇu's overlordship. The success of the conquest might be interpreted as a sign of Viṣṇu's favour.

The earth is personified as a beautiful young woman in the epics. The relationship which a perfected and righteous king enjoys with his kingdom is likened to a marriage. Thus, Bhārata says to the dead King Daśaratha:

The earth is widowed, O, King; without thee it  
has lost its radiance. <sup>58</sup>

The success of the marriage between the king and the earth is dependent on the moral conduct of the king. If he should become unrighteous, the summer months became cold and drought, floods, and pestilence will afflict the earth. <sup>59</sup> The earth had a character, personality, and will of her own, and she could in times of distress turn to Viṣṇu for help. In sum, the kingdom and the earth, its geographical base, were not conceived as impersonal secular entities. Rather, they were considered to be personal and sacred.

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<sup>58</sup> Ramāyana, II, 76. trans. Shastri, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 349-350.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Mhb., XII, 90. The idea that the king's morality affects the fertility of the land is emphasized more in the Buddhist sources than in the vedic material.

(c.) Divinity of the King. The previous two points are integrally associated with this aspect of the epic view of kingship. E. W. Hopkins, who has written one of the best studies of royal divinity in India, claims that the epics presented a basically new interpretation of the issue. He asserts:

Royal divinity of the old type slightly modified thus lingers into the epic age. But in this period arises a new conception of the king as a divine incarnation. <sup>60</sup>

This doctrine actually served to put the authority of the king on a new basis. According to the Śānti Parva account, all kings are portions, or amsas, of the god Viṣṇu.<sup>61</sup> The epic authors seem to have conscientiously sought to reduce the duality of the king and god into a unity of one principle manifested in two forms.

The ideal king as presented in the epics has some qualities which were not part of either the vedic or the arthasastric traditions, but were a part of the Buddhist traditions. Thus, we find a greater emphasis on the quality of compassion and concern for the oppressed as a prerequisite for ideal kingship in both the epics. In addition to being a fearless warrior, a veritable Indra on the battlefield, the epics demand that the king be compassionate and concerned with the

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<sup>60</sup> Hopkins, op. cit., p. 313.

<sup>61</sup> Mhb., XII, 59.

welfare of all creatures.<sup>62</sup> His own personal life is not important, but that of his dependents is, and the king should be ever prepared to lay down his life in battle.<sup>63</sup> It is at this point that the epic view of kingship begins to sound very similar to the Buddhist ideal of the Bodhisattva with its emphasis on self-sacrifice, compassion, and service to the people. It is probable that the epics represent a revalorization of kingship in light of the strong stand of Buddhism on the subject.

One remarkable characteristic of the epic view of ideal kingship is its consistency and coherence. It involves a notion of "as above, so below". That is, the virtues which make a king righteous have their counterparts in the cosmic activities of Viṣṇu. That is why the position of a king in ancient Indian society was both transcendental and mundane at the same time. The king is a part of the timeless battle between the forces of good (light) and evil (darkness), and his participation in this battle makes him divine, a portion of the eternal Viṣṇu. This is basically the logic behind the epic celebration of rājadharmā:

The very gods do not disregard a virtuous king who is truly an eternal god. The divine Lord of all creatures, having created the universe, intended the Kshatriya to rule men regarding their inclinations and disinclinations in respect of duties.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Cf. ibid., XII, 64.

<sup>63</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., XII, 65. trans. Roy, VIII, p. 147.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### VIṢṆU AND KINGSHIP

In the previous chapter, the association of the god Viṣṇu with the institution of kingship was alluded to in our discussion of the epic views of kingship. In the present chapter, the nature of this association will be examined in greater detail. The history of Viṣṇu's rise to prominence has a great deal of significance for the study of kingship in India. It mirrors the changes that were taking place in politics and society. Therefore, we must analyse the transition from Indra to Viṣṇu in order to determine its causes and implications for the conception of kingship. We must discuss Viṣṇu's kingly characteristics and show their differences from Indra's characteristics. This will lead us into a discussion of the avatāra, or incarnation, doctrine. This doctrine is important for the study of kingship, and a thorough examination of it at this point in the thesis will help to clarify many points in our subsequent discussion of kingship in the Gupta age.

In the first chapter, the character of Indra and vedic kingship were examined. We found that Indra was primarily a god of battle whose greatest feat was the destruction of the evil Vṛtra. One vedic god who accompanied Indra on this mission was Viṣṇu.<sup>1</sup> Although Indra

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<sup>1</sup>Rgveda, IV, 18, 11.



was by far the greater deity, there was a special bond that existed between Viṣṇu and Indra in the minds of the vedic poets. One entire hymn is devoted to the celebration of these two gods.<sup>2</sup> Viṣṇu is said to have shared Indra's power of drinking the magic liquid soma.<sup>3</sup> And Indra was said to share Viṣṇu's power of wide-striding.<sup>4</sup> The two gods were thus thought of as being similar in many respects.

In the post-vedic period, some interesting changes took place in the character of Indra. Indra came to be thought of as lazy, lecherous, and prone to excesses of all kinds.<sup>5</sup> As Indra's character falls into disrepute, Viṣṇu's character rises in stature. As Dr. Bharagava notes:

Since Indra was likely to be the greatest obstacle in the supremacy of Viṣṇu the Vaiṣṇavas did not hesitate to coin myths in which Indra was depicted in the worst of colours.<sup>6</sup>

In the Mahābhārata, Viṣṇu is given many of Indra's former attributes and he is called Indrakarman, having the deeds of Indra.<sup>7</sup> Indra is

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., VI, 69.

<sup>3</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., VII, 99, 6.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., p. 287.

<sup>6</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Hopkins, E.W., Epic Mythology, Trubner, Strassburg, 1915, p. 140.

still considered a deva in the epics, but he becomes a weak figure in comparison to Visnu, his former helper.

The character and personality of Visnu in the Vedas are somewhat vague. There are, however, certain associations and attributes of Visnu which give the god a distinctive character. The foremost of these associations is the idea of motion and far-extending activity: Visnu makes room for mankind by taking his three strides which measure out the universe.<sup>8</sup> The feat of the three strides is generally interpreted by scholars as symbolising the three stages of the sun's daily round.<sup>9</sup> Another frequent vedic association is the concept that Visnu lives beyond the range of man's perception in his "highest place" (parama pada). This association is allied with the three strides, for the third stride is said to have taken Visnu beyond man's visibility. Both of these major vedic associations with Visnu are evident in the following hymn from the Rgveda:

Men come not nigh thy majesty who growest  
beyond all bound and measure with thy body.  
Both thy two regions of the earth, O Vishnu,  
we know: thou, God, knowest the highest also.  
None who is born or being born, God Vishnu,  
hath reached the utmost limit of thy grandeur.

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Rgveda, Bk. 7, 99; Bk. 8, 4; and, Bk. 8, 29.

<sup>9</sup>"Vishnu is, as is well known, one of the manifestations of the sun. He envelops the earth on every side with rays of light (mayukhaih)....His fame rests on the three strides with which he crosses heaven." Raychaudhuri, H.C., Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1936, p. 11.

The vast high vault of heaven hast thou supported, and fixed the earth's eastern pinnacle securely. Rich in sweet food be ye, and rich in milch-kine, with fertile pastures, fain to do men service. Both these worlds, Vishnu, hast thou stayed asunder, and firmly fixed the earth with pegs around it. Ye have made spacious room for sacrificing by generating Surya, Dawn, and Agni. O heroes, yet have conquered in your battles even the bull-jawed Dasa's wives and magic.<sup>10</sup>

In this hymn, Viṣṇu's kingly characteristics, including majesty, fertility, and battle prowess, are apparently central in the vedic conception of the god. Indeed, the idea of lordship may be present in the etymology of the name Viṣṇu, for it may be interpreted as "lord of the spacious upland plains" (vi snu, cf. sanu "surface, table-land"), or as "the active one" (vi- or vī- "to hasten, to be active" or vis- "to be active").<sup>11</sup> Gradually, the third region measured out by Viṣṇu, which only the god knows, comes to be understood as a beautiful palace occupied by Viṣṇu seated on a lotus and bestowing his grace on all those who worship him, but this conception is not well developed in the Vedas.<sup>12</sup>

Viṣṇu is possessed of the attributes of a great warrior in vedic mythology. His youthful prowess is extolled along with his

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<sup>10</sup> Rgveda, Bk. 7, 99. trans. Griffith, Vol. II, pp. 93-94.

<sup>11</sup> Gonda, J., "The Study of Ancient Indian Religious Terminology", History of Religions, Vol. 1, 1961, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> Yet, even in the Rgveda the wish is expressed to go to Viṣṇu's "well-loved mansion where men devoted to the gods are happy". Cf. Bk. 1, 154, v. 5.

benevolence in the following hymn of the first mandala of the Rgveda:

We laud this manly power of him the Mighty One,  
preserver, inoffensive, bounteous and benign;  
His who strode, widely pacing, with three step-  
pings forth over the realms of earth for freedom  
and for life.

A mortal man, when he beholds two steps of him  
who looks upon the light, is restless with amaze.  
But his third step doth no one venture to approach,  
no, nor feathered birds of the air who fly with  
wings.

He, like a rounded wheel, hath in swift motion  
set his ninety steeds together with the four.  
Developed; vast in form, with those who sing  
forth praise, a youth, no more a child, he cometh  
to our call.<sup>13</sup>

In the first verse quoted above, three of Viṣṇu's major characteristics are alluded to: his preserving character, his bounteousness, and his benign nature. Moreover, this hymn contains a very significant allusion to Viṣṇu's chakra symbol when, in the last verse, the god is compared to "a rounded wheel". In this instance, the wheel seems to be used as a symbol for time; the ninety steeds have been interpreted as the ninety days in each of the four seasons of the solar year by Sāyaṇa.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, these verses contain an anticipation of Viṣṇu's anthropomorphic form when the god is described as youthful and well developed.

The vedic Viṣṇu incorporated in his "original" character many

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<sup>13</sup> Rgveda, Bk. 1, 155, v. 4-6. trans. Griffith, Vol. I, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 208 note.

of the attributes and characteristics that were admired in a king. These include martial prowess, benevolence, youthfulness, and powers to influence the fertility of the land. He was a god concerned with the affairs of man, and he operated in accordance with the vedic conception of universal law and order. Viṣṇu had a very early association with ṛta which signifies both the physical and moral order of the universe. In the Rgveda, Viṣṇu is called "the germ of ṛta" (ṛtasya garbhāṃ).<sup>15</sup> Gradually, the significance of the term ṛta was absorbed into the more-encompassing term dharma.<sup>16</sup> Viṣṇu assumed the role of protector and embodier of dharma in a later period.

In post-vedic literature, Viṣṇu's association with dharma becomes a dominant feature of the god's character. Dharma is given as one of Viṣṇu's names in the Viṣṇu Sahasranama of the Mahābhārata, and it is stated in this text that Viṣṇu is worshipped by the practice of dharma.<sup>17</sup> All in the universe which serves to maintain dharma is allied with Viṣṇu. Kingship, as a central support and enforcer of dharma in society, is a special area of concern for Viṣṇu. In the

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<sup>15</sup> Rgveda, Bk. 1, 156, v. 3.

<sup>16</sup> "During the Vedic period, as appears from a hymn of the Atharvaveda (xi, 9. 17) the two concepts of Rita and Dharma were distinct. Gradually the concept of Rita became less important. It signifies truth in later literature but its Vedic importance was definitely lost. The moral significance that it had was slowly attached to the concept of Dharma which by far became the more important and meaningful concept." Varma, V.P., Hindu Political Thought, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1959, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Sri Viṣṇu Sahasranamam, trans. Parthasarathy, K.E., Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1966, pp. 183-4.

Gītā, Viṣṇu is said to be manifested both as the king and the institution of kingship. Clearly alluding to kingship, Kṛṣṇa states, "I am the sceptre (danda)", and, "I am statesmanship (nīti)".<sup>18</sup> Clearer still is Kṛṣṇa's proclamation, "among men, I am the king".<sup>19</sup> These references point to Viṣṇu's integral relationship with dharma. Viṣṇu is not only the greatest knower and interpreter of dharma,<sup>20</sup> he is also the greatest defender and protector of it. Thus, Arjuna exclaims upon viewing the cosmic form of Viṣṇu, "Thou art the imperishable protector of the eternal dharma".<sup>21</sup>

The protection of dharma is the motivating factor behind Viṣṇu's periodic incarnations of avatārās. Two famous verses contain the essence of this doctrine in the Gītā:

Whenever there is decline of righteousness,  
O Arjuna, and rise of unrighteousness, then  
I manifest Myself.

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bhagavadgītā, 10, 38. "The combination of danda and nīti is the generally employed term for the science of government, or dandanīti. Cf. Kautilya's Arthasāstra, 4, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>21</sup> Bhagavadgītā, 11, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4, 7. trans. Sivānanda, p. 94.

The basic concept of avatārās, or incarnations of deities, was originally associated with the god Prajāpati in the Brāhmanas. Prajāpati is said to have assumed the forms of a tortoise and a boar in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa.<sup>23</sup> These incarnations were later attributed to Viṣṇu. But, it was not until the time of the Bhagavadgītā that the doctrine of incarnation took on its full meaning. Even in the Bhagavadgītā, the doctrine was not yet systematically expounded on the basis of the ten major incarnations of Viṣṇu. This development did not occur until the time of the Purāṇas. The doctrine of avatārās is somewhat vague in the relevant passages of the Bhagavadgītā, but these passages do express the spirit of the doctrine effectively. Whenever the scales of justice and righteousness become imbalanced and adharma replaces dharma, a deliverer will become manifest in the world to establish dharma on its proper footing. It is also implied that this sort of intervention must be done in every age. This doctrine has been characterized as "a most heartening spiritual message of the Gītā".<sup>24</sup> It promises that the World-protector will never allow adharma to completely obscure dharma. It posits a god who really cares about creation and mankind, a mighty but loving god.

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<sup>23</sup> Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, VII, 5, 1, 5; and, XIV, 1, 2, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Majumdar et al, The Age of Imperial Unity, op. cit., p. 445.

Of all of Viṣṇu's avatāras, it is Rāma who best exemplifies Viṣṇu's association with kingship. Also, with regard to dharma, it is held that Rāma is dharma incarnate (Rāmo vigrahavan dharmah).<sup>25</sup> Yet, Viṣṇu's other major incarnations such as the dwarf (Vāmana), the boar (Varāha), the man-lion (Narāsīṃha), and Kṛṣṇa also exhibit some characteristics of the god which may be related to kingship. It would be helpful at this point to study these incarnations; the popularity of which in the Gupta age is attested to by epigraphic, archaeological and literary evidence.<sup>26</sup> Preference is given here to recognised avatāras worshipped in the Gupta age,<sup>27</sup> because subsequent developments in the avatāra doctrine fall beyond the limits of the thesis.

The germ of the Vamana, or Trivikrama, avatāra can be found in the passages of the Rgveda which speak of Viṣṇu's celebrated three strides.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranamam, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Jaiswal, op. cit., pp. 182-210. The inscriptions of the Gupta kings make reference to the following avatāras: the boar (Fleet, op. cit., p. 160), the man-lion (ibid., p. 188), the dwarf (ibid., p. 62), Rāma (ibid., p. 77), and Kṛṣṇa (p. 55, and, p. 223). A highly interesting source of information on Viṣṇu's avatāras in the Gupta age is the art work of the Gupta temple at Deogarh. All the above-mentioned incarnations except the boar are represented on this temple. Cf. Vats, op. cit., pp. 1-27.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> Rgveda, Bk. 7, 94; Bk. 8, 29, and, Bk. 8, 4, etc.



Through all this world strode Vishnu; thrice his foot he planted, and the whole world was gathered in his footsteps' dust. Vishnu, the Guardian, he whom none deceiveth, made three steps; thenceforth establishing his high decrees.<sup>29</sup>

The vedic core of this story was expanded in later literature. A full account of Viṣṇu's assumption of the form of a dwarf in order to regain the universe which was in the hands of the asuras is given in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa and the Mahābhārata.<sup>30</sup>

The idea of universal dominion is the connecting link between the dwarf incarnation and kingship. An essential feature of the ancient Indian royal consecration ceremony is the imitation of Viṣṇu's three strides by the future monarch; the accompanying formula to this act is, "Thou art the stepping of Viṣṇu, thou art the step of Viṣṇu, thou art the stride of Viṣṇu."<sup>31</sup> The imitation of the three strides was thought to help the earthly monarch in achieving a wide dominion. As Gonda has commented,

It denotes a process of world-wide character. By striding Viṣṇu was believed to create ample room. The act increases the prosperity and victoriousness of the gods. The ksatriya however also increases in śrī- by vikrama- which in connection with heroes and princes is usually translated by "heroism, strength, prowess". In this more general sense it is ascribed to Indra and great kings.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Bk. 1, 22, v. 7-8. trans. Griffith, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, I. 15, 268. Mahābhārata, 5, 10, 6; etc.

<sup>31</sup> Taittīyīya-saṃhitā, I, 8, 10. and, Āpastamba-srautaśūtra, 18, 15, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., pp. 102-3.

Turning to the iconographic representation of the dwarf avatāra, we find that Viṣṇu is most often represented as a universal monarch in depictions of the myth. This fact tends to strengthen the view that this avatāra has an intrinsic relation with kingship. There are actually two distinct ways of representing the Vāmana avatāra: (a.) as a dwarf brahmacarin with an umbrella and a staff in his hands, as Viṣṇu appeared before the three strides; and, (b.) as the fully developed Trivikrama with one leg planted on the ground and the other bent upward towards the sky.<sup>33</sup> Of these two modes, the first is considered rare, but the second is common in almost all parts of India. One of the earliest and best preserved examples of the second type is found at Bādāmi and it is dated at the second half of the sixth century A.D.<sup>34</sup> In this sculpture, as in other examples of this type, Viṣṇu wears the crown of a universal monarch, called a kirita-makuta, and carries the following items in his eight hands: the conch (śaṅkha), the wheel (chakra), the club (gada), the bow (śārṅga), the arrow (bāṇa), the plough (hala), the sword (khaḍga), and the final hand is stretched out parallel to the raised leg.<sup>35</sup> In the midst of the dynamic movement

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<sup>33</sup> Banerjea, J.N., "Viṣṇu Images", (part two of "Hindu Iconography"), JISOA, Vol. XIV, 1945, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Rao, T.A.G., Elements of Hindu Iconography, Second edition, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968, Vol. 1, p. 173.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., plate 50, facing p. 172.

of the scene, the face of Viṣṇu expresses tranquillity and assurance. The items borne in the many hands of Viṣṇu all have a direct association with kingship. The conch as we know from the first chapter of the Gītā is used to rouse up men for battle; the wheel is a universally recognised symbol of royal sovereignty; the plough reflects the agricultural responsibilities of kingship; and, the remaining items are weapons.

The dwarf incarnation may be Viṣṇu's oldest embodiment, for it is closely associated with the character of the vedic Viṣṇu. The other avatāras, which were added as Viṣṇu's popularity grew in post-vedic times, follow a similar pattern. Yet, each avatāra seems intended to emphasise a different aspect of the god's character. Thus, as the dwarf incarnation highlights universal dominion, the next avatāra to be considered Varāha (boar) emphasises Viṣṇu's fertility functions.

The literary basis of the Varāha avatāra is found in the Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa, but, in this case, it is the god Prajāpati who is said to have assumed the form of a boar in order to raise the earth up from the bottom of the ocean.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, Prajāpati's exploit is transferred to Viṣṇu, and it became one of the god's most popular incarnations. The Mahābhārata contains two versions of the story. In the first, the earth comes to Viṣṇu complaining that the weight of

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<sup>36</sup> Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa, 14, 1, 2.

mankind and all the creatures was sinking the earth into the ocean, and, in response, Viṣṇu became a mighty boar and raised her up again.<sup>37</sup> According to the second version, the earth was seized by the asura Hiraṇyakaśipu who carried her down to the depths of the ocean, and Viṣṇu rescued her from the clutches of the demon by assuming the form of a boar and diving in after her.<sup>38</sup> It is the latter version which gained the greatest popularity in Puranic literature.

As with the Vāmana avatāra, the boar incarnation may be represented in sculpture in two distinct fashions which are derived from the two myths associated with Varāha. These are the fully theriomorphic form (varāha) and the anthropomorphic form with a boar's head (nr-varāha). In the first case, the boar is shown standing on four legs with his body covered with tiny human figures. This form of Varāha represents the time that the gods, ṛsis, and asuras took refuge in Viṣṇu who assumed the form of a boar for their protection.<sup>39</sup> The man-boar depiction of Varāha appears with greater frequency in the history of Indian art. The monumental statue of Varāha at Udaigiri, which was commissioned by the Emperor Chandragupta II in about 400 A.D., is the earliest known representation of the man-boar form of Viṣṇu.

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<sup>37</sup> Mbh., 3, 142, 28ff.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 13, 126, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Banerjea, op. cit., p. 414.

From the point of view of kingship, the boar incarnation may be interpreted in the light of the king's fertility responsibilities. There is ample evidence that the boar was recognised as a fertility force from very remote times in India.<sup>40</sup> A very intimate relationship with sexual overtones was thought to exist between the boar and the earth. In this relationship, the boar represents the masculine half and the earth is personified as the submissive female half. Another possible interpretation of the Varāha incarnation has been suggested by V.S. Agrawala.<sup>41</sup> This author theorizes that Chandragupta II compared his conquest of Central India and expulsion of foreign domination to the great boar's act of rescuing the earth. In this regard, it is certain that this emperor was compared to this avatāra in a well-known drama of the Gupta age.<sup>42</sup> Also, the Gupta inscriptions indicate that the common name for the Gupta empire was Prithivī, or simply "earth".<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Professor Agrawala's interpretation is probably accurate. As with any powerful religious symbol, there are a number of potentially valid interpretations of the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu.

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<sup>40</sup>Gonda, J., Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2nd edition, 1969, pp. 129-145.

<sup>41</sup>Agrawala, V.S., The Mātsya-Purāṇa A Study, All-India Kashiraj Trust, Fort Ramnagar, Varanasi, 1963, p. 333f.

<sup>42</sup>The drama is entitled Mudrārākṣhaśa and was probably written by Viśākhadatta circa 400 A.D.. For the comparison, see van Buitenen, J., trans., Two Plays of Ancient India, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968, p. 271.

<sup>43</sup>Mookerji, R.K., The Gupta Empire, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 4th edition, 1969, p. 78.

The man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu (narasimha) does not seem to have a definite vedic basis.<sup>44</sup> Elements of the story of this avatāra have been drawn from an earlier source according to P.V. Kane, who argues as follows:

Some elements of the story of the destruction of Hiranyakaśipu by Viṣṇu in the man-lion form are supplied by the story of the slaughter of the demon Namuci by Indra at dawn with the foam of waters, since Indra had agreed with Namuci that "he would not slay him by day or by night, with the dry or moist or with the palm or with the fist, or with staff or bow, etc."<sup>45</sup>

While the characters and particulars of the two myths differ, it can well be argued that the man-lion's destruction of Hiranyakaśipu follows the same pattern as Indra's destruction of Namuci. In each case, the demon had received a boon of nearly complete invulnerability which the destroying god had to evade by a clever stratagem.

Regarding the geographical origin of the man-lion god, the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa states that this god is especially revered by

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<sup>44</sup> Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> Kane, P.V., History of Dharmaśāstra, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1941, Vol. II, Pt. 2, pp. 718-9,

the Madrakas, a people of the central Punjab region.<sup>46</sup> There is a good possibility that the man-lion was originally an independent deity with a cult of his own which was later assimilated into Vaiṣṇavism.<sup>47</sup>

At an early date, as evinced by the Viṣṇudharmottara, the demon Hiranyakaśipu was interpreted as the embodiment of ignorance (ajñāna) and Viṣṇu, in the form of the man-lion, is the destroyer of ignorance.<sup>48</sup>

Artistically, the man-lion is represented in a standard fashion which was recognised from the Gupta age onward. The essentials of this representation are given in the Viṣṇudharmottara as follows:

With broad shoulder, hip and neck, with lean middle and a small abdomen, the main (part of the) body lustrous, decorated by all ornaments, he should be in the position of alidha on a throne. The face surrounded by a garland of flames has flames as manes. (He is shown as) piercing the heart of Hiranyakaśipu with sharp nails. The demon Hiranyakaśipu should be of the colour of the blue lotus and placed on the knee of the god.<sup>49</sup>

The man-lion also has a clear association with kingship. The lion has traditionally been thought to possess the qualities

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<sup>46</sup> Viṣṇudharmottara, III, 121.4. The general region of this group (Madrakas) formed a tributary state in the Gupta empire. Other regions geographically associated with avatāras were also part of the Gupta empire: i.e., the Mathura area (Kṛṣṇa) and the Vindhyan mountain range (Varāha).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Otto, The Viśva Bharatī Quarterly, Vol. I, 2, p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Viṣṇudharmottara, III, 3, 78, 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> Kramrisch, S., trans., The Viṣṇudharmottara, Part III, Calcutta University Press, Calcutta, 1928, pp. 102-3.

which are desirable in a king, such as energy, vigor, manly beauty, and strength. Thus, Kāmandaka in his work on kingship stressed the importance of simhi vṛtti, lion-like conduct, in the king.<sup>50</sup> With this quality, Kāmandaka holds, nothing daunts the king and he is able to overcome great adversity with his active exertion (utthāna).<sup>51</sup> In the Gupta age, the lion is often mentioned in reference to the bravery of the Gupta monarchs. King Chandragupta II is called sinhavikramah, "brave as a lion", in the legend of his lion-slayer type coin.<sup>52</sup> His son Kumaragupta was called the lion-Mahendra (sinhamahendro), and he also compared himself to a lion in battle.<sup>53</sup> The man-lion god is specifically mentioned in one of Kumārāgupta's coins: "Like Narasinha in presence, the lion-Mahendra is eternally victorious" (saksad iva narasinho sinhamahendro jayati-anisam).<sup>54</sup>

The figure of Kṛṣṇa is too complex to allow for a brief but satisfactory treatment in this chapter. Yet, it is not advisable to omit him from this discussion, for he, along with Vāmana, Varāha,

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<sup>50</sup> Kāmandaka's Nīṭisāra, XIII, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>52</sup> Allan, J., Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties, London, 1914, p. cxiii.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. cxix.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. cxviii. The Emperor Aśoka made use of the lion figure as a symbol of royal sovereignty on the famous Aśokan capital now located in the museum at Sarnath.



and Narasiṃha, forms a part of the "original nucleus" of the avatāra list.<sup>55</sup> Because of Kṛṣṇa's multipartite character, it is especially difficult to accurately assess this avatāra's relation to kingship. Following the critical edition of the Mahābhārata, it can be said that two important components of Kṛṣṇa's developed character are later additions to the tradition: these are what Hopkins calls the "lover-god" and the "child-god".<sup>56</sup> If these later elements of Kṛṣṇa's character are eliminated, Kṛṣṇa is essentially a kṣatriya figure whose major feat was the slaying of the wicked King Kamsa. Kṛṣṇa is also, of course, Arjuna's charioteer and the great teacher of the Bhagavadgītā. There are certain important parallels between Viṣṇu's incarnation as Kṛṣṇa and the other avatārās discussed above. Like the other avatārās, Viṣṇu is said to have taken birth as Kṛṣṇa in order to restore dharma on earth.

Regarding the origin and early history of Kṛṣṇa, it is considered probable that there was an historical person named Kṛṣṇa who lived sometime prior to 600 B.C.<sup>57</sup> Raychaudhuri's view of the historical

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<sup>55</sup> The phrase "original nucleus" in reference to these four avatārās is used by Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 120. She justifies the use of this phrase by pointing out that this is probably the earliest list which is mentioned twice in the Mahābhārata (XII, 326, 72; III, 100, 9).

<sup>56</sup> Hopkins, Epic Mythology, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>57</sup> The cut-off date of 600 B.C. is based on the identification of Kṛṣṇa with the Kṛṣṇa mentioned in the Chandogya Upanishad.

Kṛṣṇa has gained general approval among modern scholars.<sup>58</sup> He believed that Kṛṣṇa was the scion of the Vrishṇi or Sātvata branch of the Yādava clan of the Mathura region who was apotheosised by his clansmen.<sup>59</sup>

Kṛṣṇa exhibits some clear affiliations with the kṣatriya class and the institution of kingship. A very relevant passage of the Gītā identifies Kṛṣṇa with the ruler in society:

Of horses know me to be Uchchaisravas,  
born of the amrita; of lordly elephants  
I am Airavata, and of men I am the monarch.<sup>60</sup>

Both the horse and elephant alluded to in this verse have royal associations and they were presented to Indra, the king of the gods, after the churning of the cosmic sea. But, the most significant part of the verse, in my opinion, is the last part when Kṛṣṇa states that he is manifested as the king among men. This statement is in keeping with the epic understanding of kingship which holds that kings contain a portion of Viṣṇu on earth.

On a more fundamental level, the main thrust of the teaching of the Gītā is essentially directed at a kṣatriya problem: the reconciliation of violence and religion. Kṛṣṇa attempts to persuade Arjuna to fight with the following assurance: "Slain, thou wilt obtain

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>60</sup> Bhagavadgītā, X, 27. trans. Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1952, p. 247.

heaven; victorious, thou wilt enjoy the earth, therefore, stand up, O son of Kuntī, resolved to fight."<sup>61</sup> This is a typically ksatriya prospect which has been used to rouse men for battle in many cultures and times. In regard to kingship, it may be said that Kṛṣṇa put forward a metaphysical explanation of the institution and the duties it entails.<sup>62</sup> Yet, Kṛṣṇa was a disinterested teacher and advisor to kings rather than the king himself. As such, this incarnation complements the Rāmā incarnation wherein Viṣṇu actively demonstrated the conduct befitting an ideal king.

When conceived apart from his incarnations, the god Viṣṇu is a limitless deity, "resplendent, universal, infinite, and primeval".<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Viṣṇu is said to be acintya, or not comprehensible to man.<sup>64</sup> In a sense, all forms of Viṣṇu, including the avatāras and devotional images representing the god, are assumed forms and approximations of an incomprehensible reality. Yet, at an early date in the history of Vaiṣṇavism a certain mode of representing and visualising Viṣṇu was accepted as "orthodox" by the worshippers of Viṣṇu. This mode is clearly referred to in the eleventh chapter of the Gītā when Arjuna begs

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., II, 37. trans. Sivananda, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Varma, op. cit., pp. 153-162.

<sup>63</sup>Bhagavadgītā, XI, 47.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranamam, op. cit., p. 311.

Kṛṣṇa to switch from his awesome cosmic form to his "gentle form".

The relevant passage is translated as follows:

I rejoice that I have seen what was never  
seen before; but my mind is also troubled  
with fear. Show me that other form of Thine.  
Be gracious, O Lord of gods, O Abode of the  
universe. I would see Thee as before, with  
Thy crown and Thy mace and the discus in  
Thy hand. Assume again Thy four-armed shape  
O Thou of a thousand arms and of endless  
shapes.<sup>65</sup>

The four-armed Viṣṇu image gained wide popularity among Vaiṣṇavas throughout India. It is not surprising to find that the Gupta text on image making, the Brhatsamhitā, lays down instructions for making a Viṣṇu image which conforms in every respect to the four-armed shape of Viṣṇu mentioned in the Gītā.<sup>66</sup> In keeping with the theme of this chapter, I would like to point out and stress the fact that this conception of Viṣṇu is essentially a portrayal of a universal monarch of cosmic proportions.

In the standard four-armed image of Viṣṇu, the god is invariably depicted wearing the kirīṭa-makuta, the conical crown of a universal emperor. Rao describes this headgear as follows:

It is covered with jewelled discs in front  
or on all sides, and has jewelled band round  
the top as well as the bottom. The kirīṭa-

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<sup>65</sup> Bhagavadgītā, XI, 45-56. trans. Nikhilananda, op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Brhatsamhitā, Chapter 57, v. 31-5. The four-armed image of Viṣṇu is "altogether un-vedic". Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., p. 276.

makuta should be worn exclusively by Nara-  
yana among the gods. Among human beings the  
Kirita may be worn by sarvabhauma chakravar-  
tins or emperors and by adhirajas or superior  
governors of provinces.<sup>67</sup>

As Rao points out, the headgear worn by a divinity or human being is very important in the "language of symbolism".<sup>68</sup> The fact that Viṣṇu wears the same exalted crown as the chakravartin is indicative of a close similarity between the human and divine monarchs. In addition to this, the image of Viṣṇu incorporates two salient features of the ideal king prototype: the strong and youthful physique, and, the amiable and handsome face. In sum, Viṣṇu when he is conceived in concrete form is definitely a king-type. But, his four arms, or rarely more, each bearing the insignias of sovereignty, indicate that his kingship is of a higher order than temporal kingship. Viṣṇu's many arms were interpreted as symbolising the four major directions, or the eight intermediate directions, in the Viṣṇudharmottara.<sup>69</sup> This symbolism befits the universal character of Viṣṇu who stood as a symbol of the All in a manner analogous to the king standing as the symbol of the state.

In this chapter, we have reviewed the rising fortunes of the god Viṣṇu from the Vedas to the beginning of the Gupta age. The

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<sup>67</sup> Rao, op. cit., Vol. I, part 1, p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Kramrisch, trans., op. cit., p. 70.

fact that he emerged as a supreme deity in post-vedic times could scarcely have been predicted on the basis of his popularity in the vedic saṃhitās for a total of only five hymns are addressed to him. Yet, throughout his ascent to prominence Viṣṇu's character remained remarkably consistent. The later additions to the conception of Viṣṇu, such as the avatāra doctrine, tend to fit well with suggestions of Viṣṇu's character and attributes that are given in the Vedas.

A perplexing question still lingers: why was it Viṣṇu who made this ascent to prominence and not another god such as Indra or Varuṇa? We have endeavored to show that the changing social and political conditions in the post-vedic period provide us with at least a partial answer to this question. Kings in India are generally thought of as youthful men in the prime of life. When a king ages, when he sees gray hair on his head, then it is time to turn over the reigns of government to his successor. It is possible to make an analogy between this practice and the transition from Indra to Viṣṇu as royal prototypes and protectors of sovereignty. Indra's day was over when the great empires appeared in India. His brand of celestial kingship no longer matched conditions on earth, and a successor was needed. The fact that this successor turned out to be Viṣṇu is not surprising. Viṣṇu had been Indra's companion on such adventures as the slaying of Vṛtra. One might say that Viṣṇu received an education from Indra. In time, he was elevated to fill the position which was being vacated by Indra. It is significant that Viṣṇu is often called

"the younger brother of Indra" (Indranuṣa).<sup>70</sup> This epithet expresses a certain relationship between the two gods, a relationship of brotherhood rather than opposition or hostility. Also, it should be noted that Indra did not die according to this view; he just retired to his fine celestial abode. Famous kings like Samudragupta were thought to enter this fabulous palace after death.<sup>71</sup> This was true even though Samudragupta was also a staunch devotee of Viṣṇu.

The type of kingship represented by Viṣṇu differs in many respects from that represented by Indra. Viṣṇu's kingdom is an orderly cosmos governed by the principle of dharma. In terrestrial terms, it is an empire which stretches from sea to sea encompassing the entire Indian subcontinent. This land belongs to him, but it is administered by an overlord who is called a portion of Viṣṇu on earth. Occasionally, the rise of unrighteousness on earth compels Viṣṇu to break into existence in the form of an avatāra. Śrī Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu's consort, is a well-developed goddess who symbolizes fortune, fertility, and sovereignty. She has a character and history of her own, and is not merely a shadow of her husband as is Indrāṇī, Indra's consort. The alliance of Śrī Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu completes the orderly cosmos of the Vaiṣṇavas. Without going into greater detail, it is clear that conception

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<sup>70</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

of kingdom in relation to Viṣṇu is much broader and more all-encompassing than Indra's kingdom. The substitution of this view of kingship for the out-dated vedic view marks a major evolution in the history of Indian kingship. There is little doubt that a catalyst in this evolution was the Buddhist understanding of king and kingdom and the historical impact of the Mauryans and Emperor Aśoka.<sup>72</sup> Yet, as we shall see in the coming discussion of the Guptas, Hinduism absorbed the challenge of Buddhism on the question of kingship and reached its own distinct understanding of sovereignty.

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<sup>72</sup> Another catalyst in this evolution was the factor of foreign influence and invasions. Two empires which interacted with India during this formative period were the Roman and the Persian empires. There was also the influence of the Indo-Greeks and the Kāśānas. Cf. Jairazbhoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-148.



PART TWO

## INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

Prior to the rise of the Guptas, the political landscape of Northern India consisted of numerous small kingdoms and republics. The Kusānas retained control of western Punjab, but their power was waning. The power of the Śakas was also limited to parts of Gujarat and western Malwa. In short, there was no one umbrella over the vast territory of Northern India; and, the Guptas rose in the space of a few generations from obscurity to overlordship of India from sea to sea. In retrospect, the ascent of this family to supremacy seems phenomenal.

The original home of the Gupta family is not known. If the testimony of the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim I-tsing is accepted, it is possible that their original home was in the northern or central portion of the area now called Bengal.<sup>1</sup> However, the dynasty is more associated with the ancient territory of Magadha, for it was Magadha which was the real power-base of the empire. A major factor in the

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<sup>1</sup>The source of this view is found in I-tsing's reference to a king named Śrīgupta who built a temple for Chinese pilgrims about five hundred years before I-tsing's trip. It is possible that this Śrīgupta is identical with the Śrīgupta who started the Gupta line. Cf. Takakusu, J.A., trans., I-tsing: Record of the Buddhistic Religion as Practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago, Oxford, 1896.

early expansion of Gupta fortunes was the marriage of Chandragupta I, son of Ghatotkacha, to a Lichchhavī princess named Kumāradevī.<sup>2</sup> It is probable that this marriage took place in the year 320 A.D., the year of the founding of the Gupta era. Undoubtedly, this marriage alliance strengthened the power of the Guptas and extended the limits of their kingdom over Magadha and Oudh. Thus, the first major aggrandisement of the Gupta dominion came about through marriage rather than war. The coins minted by the emperor Chandragupta I to commemorate his marriage attest to the importance of the occasion in Gupta history.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that Chandragupta I took the title of mahārājadhiraja when he founded the Gupta era, for his forefathers, Śrīgupta and Ghatotkacha, were known by the lesser title of mahārāja. The evidence points to the fact that Chandragupta I set out to establish a major empire which would bring unity to India, or at least the northern portion of India (āryāvarta). But, his grand design was not to be realized during his lifetime. It was really his son, Samudragupta, who expanded the Gupta dominion to a point where it could justly be called an empire.

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<sup>2</sup>The Lichchhavīs of Vaisali were known in the time of the Buddha, and, apparently, the princess who married Chandragupta was a descendant of this illustrious and ancient nation.

<sup>3</sup>The earlier view that this series was struck by Samudragupta (first proposed by Allan) is no longer considered tenable. Cf. Smith, History, op. cit., pp. 164-5.

According to the Allahabad pillar inscription, Chandragupta I selected Samudragupta as his successor to the great disappointment of rival princes.<sup>4</sup> The exact date of Samudragupta's accession to the throne is uncertain, but it probably occurred between the years 325 A.D. and 335 A.D.<sup>5</sup> Judging by the large extent of his conquests, Samudragupta must have been a consummate military leader. It is notable that he did not attempt to incorporate every conquered territory into the empire. He claimed to have re-established many royal families who had lost sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> At an undetermined date, he made a major expedition into the South of India at least as far as the Pallava kingdom. He allowed the monarchs of many of the kingdoms to rule their land as feudatories of the Gupta emperor. It appears that Samudragupta did not desire direct political control over the lands lying south of the āryāvarta. It was perhaps after his triumphal return to the capital city of Pāṭaliputra that Samudragupta first celebrated the ancient horse sacrifice (aśvamedha), which it was claimed, had long been in abeyance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 17. Majumdar contends that the accession should be put between 340 and 350 A.D. The Classical Age, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>6</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 28.

In about the year 380 A.D., Chandragupta II, son of Samudragupta's chief queen Dattadevī, succeeded his father. Like his father, Chandragupta II was an exceptional military leader, and later<sup>8</sup> in his life he took the honored title of Vikramāditya, "Sun of Valour".<sup>8</sup> His best known campaign took place in western India and was directed against the Sakas led by their king Rudrasimha III. This campaign was a decided success and the territory formerly ruled by the Sakas had been incorporated into the Gupta empire by approximately the year 400 A.D. While conducting this lengthy campaign, Chandragupta II made the ancient city of Ujjain his "western capital". During his reign, the Gupta dominions were again increased by a marriage alliance. He gave his daughter Prabhāvatī in marriage to the Vākātaka king Rudrasena II, thus bringing the vast Vākātaka territories into an alliance with the Guptas. After her husband's pre-mature death, Prabhāvatī ruled these lands as a regent with her father's constant support. The last known date for Chandragupta II is 412-13 A.D., and shortly thereafter his son Kumāragupta replaced him on the throne. In many respects, the long reign of the Emperor Chandragupta II marked the high water-mark of Gupta civilisation. No further territory was added to the empire after his death: the task left for his progeny was the protection of the dominion he left to them.

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<sup>8</sup>It is probable that the achievements of Chandragupta II provided the basis for the legendary king Vikramāditya, who is placed by tradition in Ujjain in the first century B.C.. Cf. Sircar, D.C., Ancient Malwa and the Vikramāditya Tradition, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1969.

Kumāragupta I took the honorific title of Mahendrāditya, and had a long and generally prosperous reign of almost forty years. It is known that he celebrated the horse sacrifice, but the nature of the military action which preceded the sacrifice is unknown. Towards the end of his reign, the empire was increasingly threatened by the Huns who had designs on the land of northern India. In one very poetic inscription, some light is thrown on the end of Kumāragupta's reign and the succession of his son. Evidently, Skandagupta was away on a vital military campaign when his father passed away -- the extent of the danger to the empire is hinted at in the following passage.

Who, when (his) father had attained the skies,  
conquered (his) enemies by the strength of (his)  
arm, and established again the ruined fortunes  
of his lineage; and then, crying "the victory  
has been achieved", betook himself to (his)  
mother, whose eyes were full of tears from joy,  
just as Krishna, when he had slain (his) enemies,  
betook himself to (his mother) Devaki. <sup>9</sup>

A revitalization of the empire occurred during the first part of the reign of Skandagupta. But, there are indications that the full duration of his reign (455-467 A.D.) was marked by less prosperity and tranquillity than at the high-point of the empire. For instance, the gold coins issued by Skandagupta were debased in quality, and silver coins seem to have become more prevalent. Also, there was an

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<sup>9</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 55.

ever-present menace looming from the north-west corner of the empire in the form of the Huns. When Skandagupta died, confusion set in and the age of the Imperial Guptas was over. Although the end of the empire was marked by ever-increasing invasions by the Huns, its actual downfall was brought about by a combination of factors. A unified empire such as that of Chandragupta II could probably have repulsed the Huns. But, the Gupta empire after Skandagupta was disjointed by power struggles among the vassals possibly over a succession issue.<sup>10</sup> Northern India fell back into the political pattern that preceded the rise of the Imperial Guptas.<sup>11</sup>

The Gupta empire stands out in the pages of Indian history as the second great all-India empire; the first being that of the Mauryas. There are many similarities between the two great empires, but there are also some significant differences. In regard to administration, the Guptas retained the traditional bureaucratic administration similar to the pattern established by the Mauryans.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the administration of the Gupta empire was more decentralised than its Mauryan counterpart. There are also striking differences in the conception of kingship. In general, the king was more glorified and exalted in Gupta times. Thus, the titles of the king are much more grandiose than in

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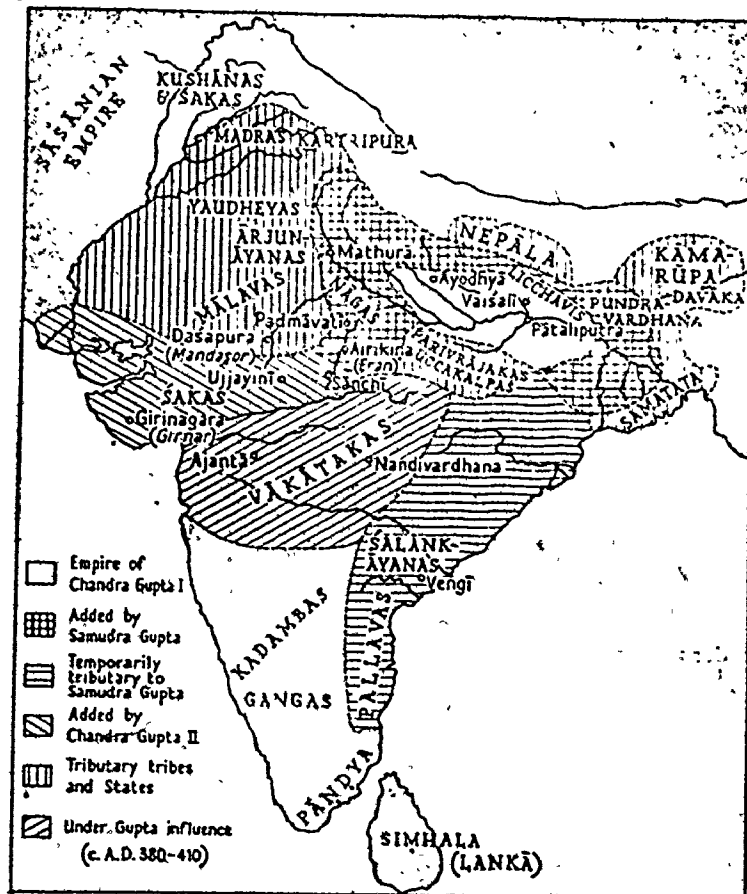
<sup>10</sup>Cf. Sastri, K.A. and Srinivasachari, Advanced History of India, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1970. p. 193.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Sinha, B.P., The Decline of the Kingdom of Magadha (Cir. 455-1000 A.D.), Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1954.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Majumdar et al, The Classical Age, op. cit., p. 349.

previous times, the king is referred to as superhuman and depicted with a halo on the coins. These changes indicate a move toward the deification of the king. And, we find the same tendency in the law books and literature of Gupta times. The king was the symbol of the state, and his actions and characteristics assumed a symbolic quality. The Gupta age provides the first well-documented instance of rāmarājya, the Hindu conception of ideal government, in Indian history. The following chapters will examine this conception of government with special attention to the king.





THE GUPTA EMPIRE

## CHAPTER V

### THE CHARACTER OF GUPTA KINGSHIP

Elements of all the four major views of kingship surveyed in Part One were present in the Gupta conception of kingship. Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of their conception of kingship is its "orthodox" and conservative character. They were Hindu monarchs, first and foremost, although they were tolerant of the heterodox faiths. They viewed themselves as "restorers" of the true dharma and they claimed to have revived sacrifices which had long been in abeyance.<sup>1</sup> Under their support, the Brahmanic social and religious system, as formulated in the law books and the Vedas, became well established throughout the Gupta empire. Yet, as Bhattacharji has noted, the Guptas, while claiming to revive the old religion, were actually pouring new wine into old bottles.<sup>2</sup> That is, a great many changes had taken place in the practices and customs of the old religion, but these were not explicitly acknowledged as alterations of the great tradition of Vedic religion. This insightful observation also holds true for the institution of kingship as it was

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Bhattacharji, S., The Indian Theogony, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970. p. 359.

practiced by the Guptas. Although the Guptas "followed the path of the sacred hymns" (sukta-marga),<sup>3</sup> their view of kingship is not drawn primarily from the Vedas. It is based primarily on sources which were much closer to the Gupta age, i.e., the later Dharmaśāstras and the epics.<sup>4</sup> In order to bring out the essential characteristics of Gupta kingship, this chapter will examine the picture given of the Guptas in their coins and inscriptions. It will be argued that the Guptas and their ministers consciously sought to emulate an ideal king type found in the epics. This ideal has been designated the "Rāma-type" since Rāma was its greatest exemplar.

The essential characteristics of an ideal king of the Rāma-type may be summarized as follows: he is a man of godlike beauty; he is knowledgeable in the Vedas; he is accomplished in all manners of intellectual and artistic pursuits; he is an invincible warrior; he is compassionate; and, he is totally devoted to his Lord (Viṣṇu) who constitutes his inner being. The empire, or mandala,<sup>5</sup> of such a king is very extensive, and, ideally, it is won without much bloodshed. It is said in the Mahābhārata that the greatest victories are achieved without fighting.<sup>6</sup> In the Rāma-type, the emphasis is placed on the

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<sup>3</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> The term mandala as defined by Kautilya in the sixth book of the Arthaśāstra, i.e., a circle of tributary chiefs surrounding the conqueror's land, is a more exact term than "empire".

<sup>6</sup> Mbh., XII, 95, 1. This statement is indicative of the importance of the doctrine of ahimsa in the epic. In XII, 264, in conjunction with a condemnation of animal sacrifice it is held that non-injury is the true essence of dharma. Here, again, it is possible to perceive a Buddhist influence on the Hindu ideas of kingship.

attractiveness of the king and the people's affection for him. These are the dominant characteristics of the Rāma ideal which are dealt with extensively in the myths and legends of the epics. It remains for us to compare this particular ideal with the descriptions given of the Guptas.

The importance of physical appearance as a criterion for ideal kingship cannot be ignored. It is related to a fundamental belief in India that one's outward appearance is a reflection of one's internal qualities. As the sixth century polymath Varāhamihira states in his Brhatsamhitā, "one's good and bad qualities are in unison with one's personal appearance".<sup>7</sup> It follows that the successful king should be exceptionally handsome for he should possess all the good qualities pertaining to kingship.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the complimentary remarks made about the king's beauty in the inscriptions constitute more than flattery for the sake of the king's vanity. These remarks indicate that the ancient criterion for selecting a king on the basis of his appearance and strength was an important factor in Gupta kingship.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Kern, trans., op. cit., p. 433.

<sup>8</sup>The virtues pertaining to one born for the divine state (daivi sampadam) are enumerated in the first three verses of the sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavadgītā. Of these, three qualities, viz., vigor (tejas), forgiveness (kshama), and fortitude (dhrīti), are especially related to the kṣatriya class.

<sup>9</sup>This is true despite the fact that kingship was an hereditary institution in Gupta times. It was thought that the goddess of royalty (Śrī-Lakṣmī) selected the king. Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

The beauty of the Guptas was a rugged beauty, according to the inscriptions. Samudragupta's numerous battle scars were thought to enhance the warrior's attractiveness. The wounds of the king are used to glorify him in the following passage from the Allahabad inscription:

Who was skilful in engaging in a hundred battles of various kinds; - whose only ally was the prowess of the strength of his own arm; - who was noted for prowess; - whose most charming body was covered over with all the beauty of the marks of a hundred confused wounds, caused by the blows of battle-axes, arrows, spears, pikes, barbed darts, swords, lances, javelins for throwing, iron arrows, vaitastikas, and many other (weapons). <sup>10</sup>

This description of the battle-scarred body of Samudragupta reminds one of the epic description of the fallen Bhīshma, whose, "body pierced with innumerable arrows, blazed forth in great beauty like Surya himself with his innumerable rays". <sup>11</sup> The phrase "by the strength of his own arm" (sva-bhuja-bala) in the above passage is a common phrase in the Gupta inscriptions. Long and powerful arms are another criterion in the composite picture of an ideal king. <sup>12</sup> Rāma is repeatedly described as having long and strong arms in the Rāmāyana. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Mbh., XII, 48. Roy, trans., op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 96

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gonda, op. cit., p. 109. Long arms (knee-length) are considered one of the marks of a great man, and an ideal king should conform to the list of 32 marks of a great man.

<sup>13</sup> Even as a baby, Rāma's long arms were noticeable. Cf. Rāmāyana, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 45.

One inscription states that the emperor Chandragupta II "carried a beauty of countenance like the full moon".<sup>14</sup> The moon was thought to typify beauty in ancient India, just as the god Indra typified strength.<sup>15</sup> This analogy may also contain an allusion to Rāma or Rāmachandra, the ideal king. The beauty of Rāma is often compared with the moon in the Rāmāyana. As an example, one reads:

In the hut, that long-armed hero with Sita at his side dwelt happily, honoured by the great Rishis, and shone like the moon accompanied by the Chitra star.<sup>16</sup>

The association between Rāma and the moon was well-known, and it is quite possible that the author of the inscription in question intended to liken Chandragupta to the great Rāma through the analogy of the moon. Elsewhere, Chandragupta II is said to have been "radiant with internal light".<sup>17</sup> This assertion is in accord with the verse in

<sup>14</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 142

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Hopkins, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>16</sup>Rāmāyana, III, 17. Shastri, trans., op. cit., Vol. II, p.39. In this passage, Sita is compared to the Chitra star (spica), a part of the constellation of Virgo, which is seen at times in close proximity to the full moon.

<sup>17</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 35.

Manu which states that the king burns like the sun with his tejas making it impossible to gaze on him.<sup>18</sup> In each of these passages, the influence of the epic and Dharmaśāstra views of kingship is seen in the Gupta inscriptions.

The beauty and fitness of the Gupta kings is epitomized in the honorific prefix śrī which precedes the names of all of the Imperial Guptas. Fleet translates śrī as "glorious" in his edition of Gupta inscriptions. As an abstract noun, śrī signifies beauty or beautiful appearance. When personified as a goddess, śrī is the goddess of beauty, welfare, and good fortune. Śrī is difficult to translate exactly because of its many connotations. It is a highly desirable quality which is especially associated with the kṣatriya class and kingship (ksatra) in the Indian tradition.<sup>19</sup> In the Mahābhārata, both the abstract quality of śrī and the goddess personifying this quality were merged into the character of Lord Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu is called Śrīman, "possessed of śrī", and Lakṣmīvan, "constantly with Lakṣmī".<sup>20</sup> In the Gupta inscriptions, one finds all of the various connotations of the term śrī. In general, it is used as an adjective signifying "glorious" or "famous".<sup>21</sup> It signified that the king was "the abode of kingly

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<sup>18</sup> Manu, VII, 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Gonda, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāman, op. cit., p. 133, and p. 170.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 10, n.

qualities" (nṛpati-guṇa-niketa)<sup>22</sup> and was possessed of great or broad glory (pr̥thu-śrī).<sup>23</sup> Śrī is also alluded to as the goddess of royalty (Śrī-Lakṣmī) who selects the king as her symbolic husband.<sup>24</sup>

Long before the Gupta age, a lion-like physique had been recognized as the mark of an ideal man. This concept, known as the "great man" (mahāpuruṣa) ideal, is first encountered in the early Buddhist sources which discuss the appearance of the Buddha.<sup>25</sup> But, there is evidence that the Buddhists were actually drawing on pre-Buddhist traditions about the marks of extraordinary men.<sup>26</sup> A careful study of the portraits of the Gupta kings on their coins reveals that they were conceived of as representatives of this ancient ideal. There is

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>23</sup>Loc. cit., Here, śrī is used as a noun signifying "glory" and modified by pr̥thu which signifies "wide", "broad", or "great". There may also be an allusion to the great archetypal king Pr̥thu contained in this passage. Pr̥thu is mentioned elsewhere in the inscriptions (ibid., p. 20).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>25</sup>The marks of a great man are enumerated in the Mahāpadān Suttanta, Lakkhaṇa Suttanta, Lalita Vistara, Dhammapada, Milindapaṇha, etc.

<sup>26</sup>Malalasekera, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 534.



no difference in the appearance of the various Gupta kings: they are always depicted as young men, with powerful physiques and handsome faces.<sup>27</sup> Even on the coins issued late in a king's reign, he is still shown as a young man of about twenty-five years of age. The coins also depict the king with some unusual anatomical features. They have short legs, very broad chests, extremely long arms (knee-length), and large heads encircled in a nimbus. A comparison of these features with the list of the thirty-two marks of a mahāpuruṣa reveals that the Guptas were conceived as ideal men according to the traditional standard.

Not only great kings (cakravartins), Buddhas, and Jinas were patterned after the mahāpuruṣa ideal. In the anthropomorphic representations of Viṣṇu dating from the Gupta age, the same mahāpuruṣa pattern was used by the sculptors.<sup>28</sup> The result is that the representations of the kings and Viṣṇu are very similar.<sup>29</sup> The major differ-

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<sup>27</sup> For pictures of these coins, see: Allan, J., Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasty, London, 1914.

<sup>28</sup> This is particularly apparent in a few surviving sculptures from Mathura. Cf. Shastri, op. cit., Fig. 3. The short legs and long arms give the figure a dwarfish appearance similar to some of Buddhas produced in the Gandhara region in the first centuries B.C. and A.D.

<sup>29</sup> One may compare a small Nepalese sculpture of the Gupta Age which represents a king (perhaps a Gupta king) with the contemporary statues of Viṣṇu produced at Mathura. The similarity is very striking. A picture of this royal figure from Nepal is given in: Singh, M., Himalayan Art, Unesco Art Books, MacMillan, New York and London, 1971, plate 40.

ence between them is the number of arms, for Viṣṇu is generally represented in his four-armed form. If not for this distinction, it would be difficult to tell them apart. <sup>30</sup> This similarity is another example of what Auboyer calls "l'ambivalence des domaines divin et royal". <sup>31</sup> It is theoretically supported by the epic doctrine that all kings are portions (aṃśas) of Viṣṇu on earth. <sup>32</sup>

In addition to physical beauty, the Rāmā-type monarch must possess a brilliant mind. He must be knowledgeable in the Vedas, and have an understanding of art and poetry. He must be a well-rounded and cultivated individual. Among the Gupta inscriptions, the Allahabad inscription refers to this aspect of kingship in the greatest detail. Samudragupta's support for and knowledge of the Vedic scriptures are twice mentioned in this inscription. The author of this poetical composition (kavya) went to great lengths to point out the poetic genius and musical ability of the king. <sup>33</sup> A good ex-

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<sup>30</sup> The statues of Viṣṇu were designed for worship, but this was not the case with representations of the Guptas. The Guptas rejected the Kuṣāṇa custom of erecting large statues of departed kings in special temples.

<sup>31</sup> Auboyer, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> Mbh., XII, 59. Kings resemble Viṣṇu because they are possessed of the same quality, śrī, which Viṣṇu possesses. But, only kings of the ideal type share this identity with Viṣṇu.

<sup>33</sup> As Winternitz states, the art of ornate court poetry or kavya, attained its full maturity and golden age in the Gupta age. Cf. Winternitz, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 13.

ample of the poet's praise appears in verse twenty-seven of the inscription:

Who put to shame (Kasyapa) the preceptor of (Indra) the lord of the gods, the Tumburu and Narada, and others, by (his) sharp and polished intellect and choral skill and musical accomplishments; - who established (his) title of "king of poets" by various poetical compositions that were fit to be the means of subsistence of learned people; - whose many wonderful and noble deeds are worthy to be praised for a very long time. <sup>34</sup>

A special gold coin issued during Samudragupta's reign shows the king playing a vīṇā. <sup>35</sup> In the passage quoted above, it is claimed that the king surpassed Nārada who was the legendary inventor of the vīṇā.

The other kings in the Imperial Gupta dynasty were also noted for their sharp intellects and love of the arts. Chandragupta II took the epithet rūpakṛtīn which suggests that he was a "composer of dramas", but none of his works have survived. <sup>36</sup> We may possess some verses composed by Chandragupta II incorporated into the legends of King Vikramāditya. <sup>37</sup> While the identity of Chandragupta II with the famous Vikramāditya is reasonably certain, <sup>38</sup> one cannot justly go on

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<sup>34</sup> Fleet, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>35</sup> Mookerji, op. cit., p. 35. This unique coin type is called the "Lyrist type", but the vīṇā bears little resemblance to a lyre.

<sup>36</sup> Winternitz, op. cit., Vol. III, p.14.

<sup>37</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sircar, op. cit. p. 113-120. The complete cycle of the Vikramāditya legends with variant readings is contained in Edgerton's Vikrama's Adventures, trans. Edgerton, F., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1926.

to state that Vikramāditya's poetry was originally composed by Chandragupta II. Chandragupta's son Kumārāgupta I also had a penchant for poetry and he received the title of "poet prince".<sup>39</sup> His successor, Skandagupta, was praised for "the innate power of his mighty intellect" and his disciplined understanding of music.<sup>40</sup>

All these references indicate that the Guptas took great pride in their proficiency in the finer things of life, including study of the scriptures, music, poetry, and drama. Yet, with their mighty intellects and famous conquests, the inscriptions carefully point out that they were neither proud nor arrogant.<sup>41</sup>

Compassion and devotion are two of the major characteristics of the Rāma-type king. These qualities were also very important in Gupta kingship. Both compassion and devotion are mentioned in the following passage from the Allahabad inscription in terms which are very reminiscent of the Bhagavadgītā:

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<sup>39</sup>Winternitz, op. cit., Vol. III, p.15

<sup>40</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>41</sup>Loc. cit..

...who, being full of compassion, had a tender heart that could be won over simply by devotion and obeisance; - who was the giver of many hundreds of thousands of cows; - Whose mind busied itself with the support and the initiation of the miserable, the poor, the helpless, and the afflicted; - who was the glorified personification of kindness to mankind;... <sup>42</sup>

The Guptas accepted the responsibility for the material and spiritual welfare of their subjects. This responsibility, as outlined in the smṛtis and the epics, made the king accountable for the condition of his subjects. If the king is perfect and true, then everyone in the land should keep on the path of dharma, be free from suffering and sickness, etc.. Skandagupta was said to have achieved this pinnacle of perfection in the following verse from the Junagadh inscription:

While he, the king, is reigning, verily no man among his subjects falls away from religion (dharma); (and) there is no one who is distressed (or) in poverty, (or) in misery, (or) avaricious... <sup>43</sup>

In the traditional understanding of rāmarājya, or ideal government, it is the quality of the ruler which determines the prosperity or misery of the people. This understanding of the importance of the king's conduct is summed up in Bhishma's statement: "It is the king who constitutes the age." <sup>44</sup> Thus, the condition of the age, which is

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<sup>42</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 14. The term bhakti, "devotion", also has the significance of "loyalty" on the part of the subjects to their king.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>44</sup>Mbh., XII, 91.

judged by the people's adherence to dharma, rested on the shoulders of the king. The king was, in the words of the Allahabad inscription, "...the spirit that was the cause of the production of good and the destruction of evil".<sup>45</sup> The king, as the supporter of dharma, played a major role in the religious life of the period. The inscriptions refer to the Guptas as beings of extraordinary spirituality, like gods dwelling on earth.<sup>46</sup> Samudragupta's fame is said to have purified the three worlds as if it were the pale water of the river Ganga.<sup>47</sup> Chandragupta II is called the "saintly sovereign".<sup>48</sup> And, Skandagupta is described as being "of spotless soul".<sup>49</sup> All of these references are in accord with the conception of kingship found in the late smrtis and the epics.

Next, we turn to the question of war and empire. The ideal of universal overlordship, or ekachhatratva,<sup>50</sup> exerted a powerful influence

<sup>45</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 55. Cf Manu, V., 93: "The taint of impurity does not fall on kings...". Also, V. 94: "For a king, on the throne of magnanimity, immediately purification is prescribed, and the reason for that is that he is seated (there) for the protection of his subjects." trans., Buhler, op. cit., p. 185.

<sup>50</sup> Literally, "one royal umbrella contition".

on the Guptas from the inception of the dynasty. The inscriptions inform us that the Guptas achieved their victories in battle by the strength of their own arms, as if they had no army to assist them.<sup>51</sup> Their potency on the battlefield was said to have a magical quality about it. For instance, Skandagupta's heroism was thought to destroy the efficacy of his enemies' weapons.<sup>52</sup>

The condition that the Guptas sought and achieved is called ekadhirājya, "the condition of being the sole adhirāja, or supreme king."<sup>53</sup> This condition entails that there be many subordinate or feudatory kings under one emperor. The restitution of authority and wealth to fallen but worthy kings was characteristic of dharmavijaya, or righteous conquest. This was, in fact, the type of conquest which the Guptas pursued. In the Allahabad inscription it is said that Samudragupta generated great fame by re-establishing many royal families which had fallen, and thus bound together the whole world.<sup>54</sup> Again, it is recorded that "...officers were always employed in restoring the wealth of the various kings who had been conquered by the strength of

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Rāma's destruction of 14,000 demons single-handedly, Rāmāyana, III, 26.

<sup>52</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 14. The Dharmavijaya of the Guptas was of the Arthasāstra, not the Buddhist type.

his arms". <sup>55</sup>

The conquests of the Guptas and resultant binding together of the "whole world" were seen in very idealistic terms. Indian scholars have generally interpreted the Gupta conquests favourably. An example of this sort of interpretation is given by R. K. Mookerji who contends that Samudragupta's only goal was peace and unity for the land. He writes:

He could not tolerate the independence of his neighbouring states, the many petty kingdoms which threatened the unity and peace of the country, his first concern and consideration. He consecrated his military power to the supreme mission of unifying the country. <sup>56</sup>

The goal of dharmavijaya was not material gain but the establishment or re-establishment of dharma through the land. <sup>57</sup> With dharma as their motive, the military activities of the Guptas were acts of cosmic significance. One of the first acts undertaken by the Guptas after the conquest of new territory was the construction of a temple or monument to their god, Viṣṇu. <sup>58</sup> Then, the land would be turned over to a care-

<sup>55</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Mookerji, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Drekmeir, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>58</sup> Examples of this practice are the Viṣṇu temple erected at Eran by Samudragupta, and Chandragupta II's giant relief carving of the boar-avatar rescuing earth and a smaller four-armed statue of Viṣṇu at Udaigiri. Cf. Agrawala, P.K., Gupta Temple Architecture, Prithivi Prakashan, Varanasi, 1968.



fully selected governor who may or may not have been the territory's previous ruler. The criteria for a feudatory of the Guptas are given in one of the longer inscriptions of Skandagupta as follows:

Thus having conquered the whole earth, (and) having destroyed the height of pride of (his) enemies, (and) having appointed protectors in all the countries, he [Skandagupta] cogitated in many ways, -- "Among all my servants, put together, who is there, who -- suitable; endowed with intellect; modest; possessed of a disposition that is not destitute of wisdom and memory; endowed with truth; straightforwardness, nobility, and prudent behaviour; and possessed of sweetness, civility, and fame; -- loyal; affectionate; endowed with manly characteristics; and possessed of a mind that (has been tried and) is (found to be) pure by all the tests of honesty; ... -- shall govern all my (countries of the) Surashtras? I have it; (there is) just one man, Parmadatta, competent to bear this burden." 59

The local kings appointed by the Guptas were referred to by a number of different titles: nṛpa, nṛpatī, parthiva, mahārāja, and mahāśāmantā. 60 The Guptas were distinguished from the lesser kings by the title "lord of kings" (nṛip-adhipena). 61

The empire the Guptas established was simply called "the earth" (prithvī). This is in keeping with the belief that the Rāma-type king's ksetra, or sphere of influence, is the entire earth. 62 It was said of

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<sup>59</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>60</sup> Mookerji, op. cit., pp. 150-151.

<sup>61</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> Sircar, "The Cakravartin and his Ksetra", op. cit., p. 318.

Samudragupta that his fame was tasted by the waters of the four oceans.<sup>63</sup>  
 The earth was conceived as a woman in the Gupta inscriptions. This analogy is carried to the extent of imagining natural features of the earth's surface as parts of the female anatomy:

While Kumaragupta was reigning over the (whole) earth, whose pendulous marriage-string is the verge of the four oceans; whose large breasts are (the mountains) Sumeru and Kailasa; (and) whose laughter is the full-blown flowers showered forth from the borders of the woods; ...<sup>64</sup>

The earth was conceived as the "great mother" and the "broad goddess" (mahi or prthivī).<sup>65</sup> As a female, she was constantly in need of protection and in danger of oppression and exploitation.<sup>66</sup> The king was the recognized protector of the earth, and their relationship resembled a marriage.

The Mahābhārata regarded the earth as the property of the god Viṣṇu who was responsible for her protection. One of the most frequently quoted passages from the epic runs as follows:

<sup>63</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 27. It was thought that India or Jambudvīpa, was surrounded by oceans on four sides. The nature of the northern ocean is unclear; perhaps it was a desert in Central Asia.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>65</sup>Hopkins, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Manu, V, 147-149; IX, 2-3.

As gold is born of Fire and cows are born of the Sun, so Earth belongs to Viṣṇu, so he who gives these three gives the three worlds. <sup>67</sup>

The story of King Uparichara in the epic emphasizes the fact that a Viṣṇu-devoted king should regard the Earth and all of his possessions as the property of Viṣṇu. <sup>68</sup> This is the foundation of the doctrine that Viṣṇu is the real ruler of the land and the king is merely his delegated viceroy. <sup>69</sup> This doctrine was also a factor in Gupta kingship, albeit on an implicit level. The Gupta conception of kingship was drawn with very broad and basic strokes: the empire was the earth, personified as a goddess protected by Viṣṇu, the king was a Rāma-type monarch who appointed lesser kings to govern the various territories of the empire. Devotion, or loyalty (bhakti), was the keystone of this order. The lesser kings, or feudatories, were appointed because of their great devotion to the adhipati, or emperor, while the adhipati was supremely devoted to the Jaggannātha (Viṣṇu), Lord of all created beings. All people, regardless of sectarian differences, were supposed to be devoted to the saddharma, the "true religion" and the social order sanctioned by it. It was the duty of the king and his agents to ensure

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<sup>67</sup> Mbh., III, 200.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., XII, 336.

<sup>69</sup> As examples of dynasties which explicitly followed this doctrine, one may mention the Gangas of Orissa, (Cf. Sircar, Studies in the Religious Life..., op. cit., p. 59) and the Chahamanas of Central India (Cf. Sharma, D., "Chahamana Central Administration", Sarupa Bharati, op. cit., pp. 307-314.).

that no subject "falls away from dharma".<sup>70</sup> The Brahmins also upheld the dharma by their instruction and example, and they were given the devotion and support of the king and the populace. The importance of bhakti in the religious milieu of the Gupta age is well recognized by scholars, but its importance in the political sphere is often overlooked. The loyalty (bhakti) which the people directed to the king was in Hopkins' words, "...no cold fidelity but a warmer feeling".<sup>71</sup> The king stood as a symbol of divinely ordained and created social order, and thus he merited the devotion of the people.

It is noteworthy that the Gupta conception of kingship received the wholehearted support of the Brahman class. In the opinion of some noted authorities, including U. N. Ghoshal, it was the Brahman class which authored the conception in the first place. According to Ghoshal, the conception was developed in the later law books and epics in order to counter two major threats to the traditional social order. He writes:

In the branch of social life the mass settlements of foreigners with their alien social and cultural standards, following the wake of the foreign invaders, threatened to disrupt the indigenous society....In the sphere of religion, Buddhism, thanks to the Imperial propaganda of Aśoka and the religious

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<sup>70</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>71</sup> Hopkins, E. W., "The Epic use of bhagavat and bhakti", JRAS, 1911. p. 732.

zeal of missionaries, not only entrenched itself in the Indian soil, but was well on its way to becoming a world-religion, while Jainism entered on its career of becoming an all-India cult. In the face of this challenge Brahmanism girt itself up by a tremendous intellectual effort for a new lease of life. For while the entire body of its social and religious laws was developed and systematised in the Smriti works of Manu and Yajnavalkya, its extensive cycle of traditions myths and legends, together with its whole code of individual and social ethics, was woven into the texture of the original epic tale of the Kauravas and the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. It thus prepared itself for the triumph which was to be its reward in the following period, the age of the Imperial Guptas.<sup>72</sup>

The Gupta age did represent a triumph for the Brahmins. The generosity of the Guptas to the Brahmins is attested to in the inscriptions,<sup>73</sup> and the Guptas respected and enforced the traditional social structure which favored the Brahman class. Therefore, it was in the Brahman's interest to support a strong dharma-oriented monarchy which accepted the high status accorded the Brahmins in the law books.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Gupta conception of kingship drew on all the traditions of kingship discussed in the first part of the thesis. The vedic contribution is especially evident in the Guptas' proud adherence to vedic royal rituals such

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<sup>72</sup>Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>73</sup>Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 14.

as the consecration ceremony and the horse-sacrifice. Moreover, they fulfilled the vedic king's dual obligations: protection of their subjects and support of the Brahman class. The Guptas had not forgotten Indra, the vedic king's prototype, and Indra's abode is cited as their ultimate home in the inscriptions.

The Arthaśāstra elements are evident in the Guptas' approach to the administration of their empire. Their understanding of dharmavijaya, or righteous conquest, is much more in line with Kāutilya's interpretation of the term than that of the Buddhists. They constructed their empire in typical Arthaśāstra fashion, making alliances where possible and making military conquests where alliances were not feasible. Their practice of giving land and villages to Brahmins after new land has been incorporated into the empire was recommended in the Arthaśāstra. In addition, it is possible to perceive an Arthaśāstra influence in the Guptas' tolerance of other religious faiths and customs.

We have also seen that Gupta kingship cannot be satisfactorily explained on the basis of vedic and Arthaśāstra traditions alone. The image of the king and the ideology of kingship in the Gupta age can only be explained by recourse to the epics. The essential components of what we have termed the Rāma-ideal of kingship were all emphasized by the Guptas in their panegyrics. These components include physical beauty, strength, youthfulness, intellectual and artistic ability, compassion, Viṣṇu-devotion, and universal overlordship. While some of these elements were considered essentials

of kingship prior to the epics, it is only in the epics that they are welded together into a unity, an ideal which is illustrated by kings such as Rāma. A remarkable consequence of their conformity to the Rāma-ideal is that the Guptas lost their individuality. They are like carbon copies of each other, without the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities of individual personalities. After the Guptas, this idealisation of the king with the consequent loss of individuality became a characteristic of Indian kingship in general.<sup>74</sup>

Along with the Rāma-ideal of kingship went the ideology of the ideal state which was thought to be the direct result of the king's perfection. This state of harmony between man and man and mankind and nature is simply called rāmarājya, or Rāma's kingdom. Just as Rāma served as the archetype of the Guptas, rāmarājya served as the archetype of their empire. The vision of rāmarājya, as Lannoy has noted is a vision of life as a grand drama, full of dignity, honour, and nobility in which the king played the major role as a symbol to be

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<sup>74</sup>Cf. Devahuti, D., Harsha - A Political Study, Oxford University Press, London, 1970. p. 149: "It must be remembered, however, that while each king was unique as an individual, and if strong and able made an imprint on government and even on society in many ways, as a king he was expected to act as an archetype. Harsha's policies and attitudes regarding, for instance, religion, learning or interstate relations were the attitudes and policies expected of any Indian Monarch although molded both consciously and inevitably in the matrix of his times. A portrait of Harsha,...is therefore also a portrait of any king of the period."

imitated by the people.<sup>75</sup> The concept of an ideal state along the lines of rāmarājya is clearly lacking in our vedic and Arthasastra sources. Aside from the epics, the only tradition discussed in the first part of the thesis which broaches the question of the ideal dhamma kingdom is the Buddhist tradition. In the Buddhist conception of a cakkavatti's realm we find many parallels to rāmarājya. In both cases, the king is made magically responsible for the weather conditions, the fertility of the land, and the righteousness of the people. However, the Buddhist cakkavatti state and the Hindu rāmarājya differ in one important respect: the former is oriented to the Buddha and his teachings about dharma while the latter is oriented to Viṣṇu and his consort Lakṣmī.

Gupta kingship was the culmination and fruition of an intellectual movement which had been initiated after the death of the Emperor Aśoka. This grand conception of kingship is attributed to the Brahman class in general because they authored the texts in which it appears. There are also many incidental references which lead us to the conclusion that the Brahmins were pushing for a new understanding of kingship. For example, Yudhisthira asks the following question in the Mahābhārata:

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<sup>75</sup> Lannoy, op. cit., p. 196.



Why, O bull of Bharata's race, have the  
Brahmanas said that the king, that ruler of men,  
is a god? <sup>76</sup>

The Brahmanas "triumphed" in the Gupta age because the Guptas were powerful enough to wed theory with practice and establish a Hindu empire which rivaled that of Aśoka. This is not to suggest that the Guptas were somehow mere pawns in the hands of the Brahmanas. Rather, it was a mutually beneficial relationship which embodied the ancient conception of the unity of the two upper classes in aryan society. The Brahmanas provided the ideology for empire and the Guptas carried it through to reality. As Bhīshma states in the

Sānti Parva:

That kingdom enjoys true felicity where the  
invisible fears of the subjects are dispelled  
by the Brahmana and all the visible fears are  
dispelled by the king with the might of his arms. <sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Mhb., XII, 68. Roy, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 153.

<sup>77</sup> Mhb., XII, 74. trans., Roy, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 170.

CHAPTER VI  
VAIṢṆAVISM AND THE IMPERIAL GUPTAS

While the previous chapter dealt with the Guptas' conception of kingship and its sources, the purpose of this chapter is to delineate and discuss the evidence relating to the religious affiliation of the Guptas. This evidence consists primarily of the Gupta inscriptions and coins. These sources reveal a great deal about the religious side of Gupta kingship. In the first place, they indicate that the Guptas were staunch followers of the Vedic dharma tradition which is referred to as "the path of the sacred hymns" (sukta-marga) in an inscription.<sup>1</sup> In the second place, there are many very significant references to the god Viṣṇu, his consort Śrī-Lakṣmī, and his avatāras among the coins and inscriptions left by the Guptas. The Guptas showed a clear preference for Viṣṇu at a time when the religion known as Vaiṣṇavism was taking shape and growing in popularity throughout Northern India. Indeed, it has been suggested by Professor D. C. Sircar, among others, that the Guptas' support of Vaiṣṇavism was the cause rather than the effect of the growing importance of the religion in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D..<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>The Classical Age, op. cit., p. 419.

The relationship that existed between the Guptas and Vaiṣṇavism is a meaningful topic to study, but it is not a topic which allows for hasty conclusions or facile generalizations. Therefore, this chapter will review in depth all the available evidence on this topic before reaching our conclusion.

Before commencing the discussion, it should be noted that Viṣṇu is referred to by a number of different names in the inscriptions of the Guptas. The name Viṣṇu is used to refer to the god in at least four separate instances.<sup>3</sup> The title Bhagavat, "the adorable one", is used in the Gupta inscriptions to refer exclusively to Viṣṇu, and, judging by its frequent appearance in the inscriptions, it must have been one of Viṣṇu's most popular names in the Gupta age.<sup>4</sup> Names which allude to the weapons of Viṣṇu, such as Chakrabhrit, "the wielder of the discus", and Sarṅgin, "possessor of the bow Sarṅga", were also popular in the inscriptions.<sup>5</sup> The names Kṛṣṇa and Govinda reflect the importance of Bhagavatism in the Gupta conception of Viṣṇu.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these names and titles, Viṣṇu may be referred to by mention of one of his outstanding and well-known physical char-

<sup>3</sup>Fleet, op. cit., pp. 61, 65, and, 142.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 56, 40, 41, 35c.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 56 and 65.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 55 and 65.

acteristics. An example of this occurs in the Eran pillar inscription where the phrase "the four-armed god" is used to denote Viṣṇu.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Viṣṇu's Vedic association with the god Indra is alluded to in an inscription of Skandagupta where Viṣṇu is called Indranuja, or "the younger brother of Indra".<sup>8</sup>

There is great significance in the fact that so many different names were used to denote the same god in the inscriptions and sacred literature of the day. Over a thousand of these names of Viṣṇu are found in the Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam.<sup>9</sup> For the devotee, they bring out the many facets and perfections of the god's infinite personality. They also provide a clear indication of Viṣṇu's eclectic background: there are militaristic titles which refer to the weapons carried by Viṣṇu (Chakrapani, Śārṅgapani, Gadadhara, etc.); there are names which allude to the pastoral link between Viṣṇu and Bhagavatism (Kṛṣṇa, Govinda, Madhusudana, etc.); and, there are certain names, such as Indranuja, which reflect Viṣṇu's Vedic background. A character, be he a divinity or a king, was not limited to one or two names in ancient India. Each of the Gupta monarchs are referred to by several different names, some of which coincide with Viṣṇu's names.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam, op. cit..

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., pp. 17, 44, 72, etc.

This fact was probably the delight of court poets and panegyrists for it enriched their vocabulary, but it has also created a number of problems for the historian.<sup>11</sup>

The first historical source which provides information on the religious affiliation and activities of the Gupta monarchs is the famous Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta. This inscription, which is engraved on a pillar originally erected by the Emperor Āśoka, is also the main source for the political and military history of the Gupta empire under Samudragupta.<sup>12</sup> Fleet contended that this inscription was composed after the death of the king, and he therefore entitled the work the Allahabad posthumous stone pillar inscription of Samudragupta. Fleet based this contention largely on the statement in the first paragraph that the king's fame had gone to Indra's abode, which he understood as a euphemism indicating that the king had died.<sup>13</sup> The evidence supporting Fleet's opinion is slim, however, and I concur with Sircar's view that this inscription was recorded late in Samudragupta's lifetime but before his well-

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<sup>11</sup>A good example of the confusion caused by multiple names is the case of Kacha which was probably the personal name of Samudragupta, but may have been a different king. Cf. Smith, op. cit., p. 166, n. 1.

<sup>12</sup>Mookerji, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 10, n. 2.

publicized performance of the aśvamedha sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> It is improbable that the horse sacrifice in which the king took so much pride would not be listed among his achievements; therefore, it must have been composed prior to the sacrifice as it makes no mention of it.

As mentioned above, the Allahabad inscription has been extensively used by scholars in an effort to reconstruct the history of the Gupta empire under Samudragupta. We shall examine this source from the religious viewpoint. It contains a number of interesting references which provide our initial insights into Gupta religion.

To begin with, the Allahabad inscription associates Samudragupta with Lord Viṣṇu in a variety of ways. The king is given one of the familiar epithets of Viṣṇu, Apratitatha, or "the matchless warrior".<sup>15</sup> This title which also appears on Samudragupta's coins as well as those of his son is one of Viṣṇu's special names listed in the Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Samudragupta is described in terms which are very reminiscent of the Bhagavadgītā's description of Puruṣa. It is said that he (Samudragupta) "...being incomprehensible,

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<sup>14</sup>Sircar, D.C., ed., Select Inscriptions, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1965. p. 263, n. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam, op. cit., p. 320.

was the spirit that was the cause of the production of good and the destruction of evil".<sup>17</sup> Both puruṣa, translated as "spirit", and achintya, translated as "incomprehensible", were particular names for Viṣṇu from the epic period onwards.<sup>18</sup>

The association between the king and Viṣṇu in the Allahabad inscription is so pronounced that scholars such as D. C. Sircar have been led to conclude that Samudragupta is actually claiming to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu.<sup>19</sup> There is a substantial amount of evidence to support this conclusion. For, the inscription goes on to state that the king "...was mortal only in celebrating the rites and observances of mankind, (but was otherwise) a god, dwelling on the earth".<sup>20</sup> All of this, it may be pointed out, is consistent with the Viṣṇu-oriented understanding of kingship, developed in the epics, according to which great kings are aṁśas, or portions of the eternal Viṣṇu on earth, born

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<sup>17</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 8; saddhv-asadh-udaya-pralaya hetu-purushasya-chintyasya. Cf. Bhagavadgītā, IV, 8; "For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma, I am born in every age." trans. Nikhilananda, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam, op. cit., p. 185 and p. 311. The word puruṣa literally means "man" or "human being", but it is also used to designate the universal soul or Supreme Spirit in Sanskrit; as such, it is synonymous with Viṣṇu.

<sup>19</sup> Sircar, Select Inscriptions, op. cit., p. 266.

<sup>20</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 8: loka-samayaa-kkriy-anuvidhana-matra-manushasva dhamno-devasya.

among men in order to ensure the stability of dharma.

The Allahabad inscription stresses two sides of Samudragupta's character: the outer-directed warrior, and the inner-directed man of compassion and intellect. These two traits are also present in the character of Visnu. In the first place, the inscription explains why the king earned the title of "matchless warrior":

Who was skillful in engaging in a hundred battles  
of various kinds;- whose only ally was the  
prowess of the strength of his own arm;...  
whose most charming body was covered over with all  
the beauty of the marks of a hundred confused  
wounds....<sup>21</sup>

It is characteristic of the Gupta inscriptions to stress the individual valour of the king without reference to his supporting army. They make it sound as though the king marched alone against a host of enemies. The magnanimity of Samudragupta after the battles is indicated by the fact that he would capture and then liberate the opposing kings.<sup>22</sup> The Sanskrit words used in this passage are charged with religious significance. The king is said to show favour, or anugraha, to the fallen kings by granting them liberation, or moksha.<sup>23</sup> Anugraha, in its theological sense, signifies the grace of god shown to the devotee;<sup>24</sup> and, moksha signifies the goal of human life: liberation

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>22</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 12

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Rao, op. cit., p. 238-239.



from the bonds of samsāra. Considering the other allusions and word-plays of this inscription, I consider it unlikely that these religiously potent words were used by accident in this passage.

Suitable homage is paid to the military achievements of Samudragupta in the Allahabad inscription, but the most lavish praise is reserved for the compassionate and intellectual side of the king's character. Samudragupta is called "the refuge of religion", dharmaprachirabandhah,<sup>25</sup> a phrase which is reminiscent of the Brahmana's description of the king as dharmapati, "guardian of dharma".<sup>26</sup> The king was not only the protector of religion; he was also a person whose mind had penetrated into the essential truths of religion (vaishvānara-tattvabhedī).<sup>27</sup>

In line twenty-six of the inscription, Samudragupta's concern for the poor, helpless, and afflicted people of the land is expressed. Passages such as this suggest that social service was a sort of religious duty among the Gupta kings. It is, in Mookerji's phraseology, "...a form of worship of God embodied in humanity, of Nara-Nārāyana."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, V., 3.3.6.

<sup>27</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>28</sup>Mookerji, op. cit., p. 78.

In this passage, as well, the idea of incarnation is hinted at in connection with the king. He is called vigrahavato lok-anugrahasya, or "the personification of kindness to mankind".<sup>29</sup> The word anugraha is used in a slightly different sense than in the previous passage where it occurs, but the connotation of grace or divine favour remains.

Thus, the king was very devoted to his subjects, and the inscription suggests that this devotion was mutual. It is stated that the king was full of compassion and could be won over by devotion, or bhakti.<sup>30</sup>

Bhakti is, of course, generally associated with the relationship between the devotee and the object of devotion, a god or goddess. But, as Hopkins has shown, the idea of bhakti directed to a monarch was well-known in the Mahābhārata.<sup>31</sup> The passage which speaks of devotion to the king constitutes another echo of a verse from the Bhagavadgītā. It is translated as follows: "...who, being full of compassion, had a tender heart that could be won over simply by devotion and obeisance."

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<sup>29</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 8

<sup>30</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Hopkins, "The Epic Use of Bhagavat and Bhakti", op. cit., p. 732: "...the nearest approach to the attitude of the worshipper is shown in the love of the people toward the king, who unites different divinities. As any god is bhaktavatsala, 'fond of his devotees',...so the king is bhaktavatsala."

(bhakty-avanati-matra-grahya-mridu-hridayasy-anu-kampavato).<sup>32</sup> This is very similar to the twenty-sixth verse of the ninth chapter of the Bhagavadgītā:

Whoever offers Me with devotion a leaf,  
a flower, a fruit, or a little water -  
that, so offered devotedly by the pure-  
minded, I accept.<sup>33</sup>

There is a verse in the lawbook of Manu which indicates that a king was the recipient of daily presents of fruits and vegetables from his subjects.<sup>34</sup> The term used for these offerings, bali, is the same term used to denote offerings for the gods.<sup>35</sup> It is probable that this custom was preserved under the Guptas, and that the passage considered above is an allusion to this practice.

The only other genuine inscription of Samudragupta in existence is the damaged Eran stone inscription. This inscription commem-

<sup>32</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>33</sup>Bhagavadgītā, IX, 26. trans. Sivananda, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup>Manu, VIII, 307.

<sup>35</sup>On the use of this word, cf. Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 11. In the Rgveda (VII, 6,5, X, 173,6), as Prof. Bhargava has noted, the people are called Balihrt or payers of Bali. He suggests that these offerings were originally voluntary, and later became mandatory. Cf. Bhargava, op. cit., p. 259.

orates the construction of a religious site, but the crucial portion has been broken away. It was originally suggested by General Cunningham that this work belonged with the temple containing the colossal image of Viṣṇu at Eran, and this suggestion still seems probable.<sup>36</sup> It has been pointed out by a few observers that this colossal image of Viṣṇu bears a close resemblance to the portrait of Samudragupta on his coins.<sup>37</sup>

Samudragupta is not given a Vaiṣṇava title such as Paramabhāgavata in either of the extant inscriptions. This fact has led to speculation that although Samudragupta was certainly a Vaiṣṇava, he belonged to a different group than his successors who took the title Paramabhāgavata.<sup>38</sup> I have examined this question in detail, but I find that there is not sufficient information available to make a conclusive judgment on the matter. If there were a doctrinal difference between Samudragupta and his successors, it could not have been a very big one, for the only difference seems to be that they called themselves Paramabhāgavatas and he did not. On all other matters regarding religion, Samudragupta's successors followed his pattern.

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. The Classical Age, op. cit., p. 419.

The coins of the Emperor Samudragupta tend to corroborate the evidence contained in his inscriptions. The earliest known Gupta coinage dates from the latter half of Samudragupta's reign. The early specimens bear an unmistakable resemblance to the coins of the non-Indian Kuṣāṇa dynasty.<sup>39</sup> Gradually, certain foreign elements of the Kuṣāṇa models were "Indianized" in the later coins of Samudragupta and his successors. The degree of Indianization in the Gupta coins is used by numismatists as a key to their chronology.<sup>40</sup> An excellent example of this process of Indianization is the transformation of the Iranian goddess of fortune Ardochso into the Indian goddess of wealth and well-being Śrī Lakṣmī. The cornucopia held by Ardochso on the Kusana coins became the lotus held by Śrī Lakṣmī on the later Indian versions of this coin type.<sup>41</sup>

One significant element of Kuṣāṇa coinage which was retained in the Gupta coins is the mark of divinity, the nimbus, which encircles the portrait of the king. It was the Kuṣāṇa king Kadphises II (c. 65-75 A.D.) who first introduced signs of divinity on his coins: his

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<sup>39</sup>Allan, op. cit., p. lxviii.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Allan, op. cit., p. lxxii.

likeness is shown rising from the clouds with flames issuing from his shoulders.<sup>42</sup> This king's famous son, the Emperor Kanishka (c. 78-101 A.D.), is credited with introducing the halo in conjunction with his portrait on Kuṣāṇa coinage.<sup>43</sup> Prior to this, the halo had been reserved for representations of deities and the Buddha. The Kuṣāṇas also introduced new royal titles which befitted their grandiose conception of kingship. It is noteworthy that the Guptas adopted some of the titles first used by the Kuṣāṇas. One prominent example of this practice is the Kuṣāṇa title "Mahārāja mahata rājatirāja" which the Guptas shortened to Mahārājadhirāja".<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. Chattopadhyay, B., The Age of the Kushanas A Numismatic Study, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1967. p. 136.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>44</sup>It is indisputable that the Kuṣāṇa doctrines of divine kingship had some influence on the Guptas. (Cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 543) But, the actual extent of this influence is difficult to ascertain. The halo and the great titles were eagerly adopted by the Guptas and their aides. However, one may point to one Kuṣāṇa custom which was apparently ignored by the Guptas. This is the curious custom of constructing temples to enshrine statues of their departed kings. These shrines known as devakulas, were constructed in various parts of India, especially in the Mathura region (Cf. Sahni, D. R., "Three Mathura Inscriptions and their bearing on the Kuṣāṇa Dynasty", JRAS, 1924, pp. 399-406). This custom was very foreign to the people of India who were accustomed to temples for deities and not for the worship of dead monarchs. The Guptas rejected this foreign custom and concentrated instead on the construction of temples to Viṣṇu who represented the Universal Emperor. Therefore, we may conclude that the Guptas treated the Kuṣāṇa customs as they did the strange motifs of Kuṣāṇa coinage; that is, they Indianized them.

The most common type of coin minted by Samudragupta is simply called the "standard type". The following description of this coin is given by Mookerji;

Its obverse shows 'King standing left nimbate (i.e., with halo round head), wearing close fitting cap, coat, and trousers, ear-rings and necklace, holding in left hand standard bound with fillet, dropping incense on Altar, with his right hand; behind altar is a standard, bound with fillet, surmounted by a Garuda. The obverse also bears the legend which in complete form reads: Samarasatavitata vijayo jitaripurajite divam jayati; the conqueror of unconquered fortresses of his enemies, whose victory was spread in hundreds of battles, conquers heaven.'

The reverse depicts 'Goddess Lakshmi seated facing, on the throne, nimbate, wearing loose robe, necklace, and armlets, holding fillet in outstretched right hand and cornucopia in left arm; her feet rest on lotus; traces of back of throne on right on most specimens; border of dots'.<sup>45</sup>

For the student of religion, this coin of Samudragupta tells a great deal about the religion of the Guptas. In fact, every aspect of the coin on either side contains a religious or mythological allusion. Two features of the coin deserve special note. These are the Garuda standard in back of the altar and the goddess Śrī Lakṣmī who dominates the reverse side of the coin.

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<sup>45</sup>Mookerji, op. cit., p. 31. The substance being thrown by the king into the fire may well be a sacrificial offering (purodasa) instead of incense.

The Garuda standard, or garudadhvaja, became a regular feature on the coins of the Imperial Guptas. The reason behind its popularity is evident, for Garuda, in addition to being the vehicle of Viṣṇu, was the family emblem of the Guptas.<sup>46</sup> Also, there was evidently a connection between the Garuda standard, Viṣṇu, and the institution of kingship in ancient India as documented by the Besnagar inscription of the second century B.C.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Garuḍa had a long history in India prior to the Guptas, and Smith's contention that the Garuḍa emblem was copied from imperial Rome does not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>48</sup>

The choice of Garuḍa as a dynastic emblem was very appropriate for the Guptas. In the first place, they were Vaiṣṇavas and Garuḍa proclaimed their fond association with Viṣṇu. In the second place, Garuda was known as a great destroyer of nāgas, or serpents, and the Guptas' main rivals for power in Western Central India were a group of kings collectively known as the Nāgas. A very clever allusion to this fact appears in one of Skandgupta's inscriptions in which local representatives of the Guptas are likened to "so many Garuḍas" who strike down hostile kings, "who were so many serpents (nāgas), lifting up

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<sup>46</sup>The Garuda seal (garuḍmadanka) was used as the official seal on land charters issued by the Guptas. Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Altekar, A. S., Catalogue of Gupta Coins in the Bayana Hoard, Numismatic Society of India, Bombay, 1954, p. liii.



their hoods in pride and arrogance".<sup>49</sup> Apparently, these kings of tribal republics had pronounced Śaivite leanings and this reference may also allude to the spread of Vaiṣṇavism in Western India.<sup>50</sup>

The goddess Lakṣmī, like Garuḍa, became a regular feature of Gupta coins from the earliest examples of Samudragupta through the later coins of Kumāragupta. The presence of this timeless goddess on Gupta coins constitutes a remarkable continuation of an ancient custom of Indian kings. Professor Hari Rao has pointed out that the goddess Lakṣmī,

...is one of the earliest devices frequently found on tribal coins and coins of local rulers found in Kausambi, Ayodhya, and Ujjain and assigned to the period B.C. 300 to B.C. 100.<sup>51</sup>

Lakṣmī is generally considered to be the divine personification of beauty, wealth, prosperity, and good fortune, but she also has a very special relationship to the institution of kingship which can be detected from very early times onward.<sup>52</sup> When one examines the long career of

<sup>49</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>51</sup>Hari Rao, V.N., "The Symbolism of Gaja Lakṣmī", Journal of Indian History, Vol. XLVIII, April, 1970, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup>We find that Lakṣmī is associated with kings and kingship in the Jataka tales which date from the second century B.C.. In the Sirikalakanni Jātaka, for example, Śrī Lakṣmī states, "I preside over the course of conduct that gives lordship to mankind...". trans. Cowell, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 165.

this goddess, it is clear that she underwent something of a change in Gupta times. For, she is closely allied to the god Viṣṇu in a subordinate role as his humble wife. According to a recent work on Lakṣmī, the goddess exhibits a dual aspect in the Gupta age. Dr. Saraswati writes:

We find her Lakṣmī on innumerable Gupta coins in her own capacity symbolising every object that the Gupta kings intended to achieve as well as massaging Viṣṇu's feet typifying a devoted Hindu wife. <sup>53</sup>

Śrī Lakṣmī was undoubtedly the most important goddess for the Gupta kings. Not only did she symbolize the well-being and universal lordship they desired, she was also thought to symbolically reside with the king. According to this belief, the goddess selects the candidate most suited for kingship and marries him thus insuring his success. <sup>54</sup> The term that is used for the goddess's selection is svayamvara, the same term that is used to denote a princess's choice of a husband after a difficult contest among her suitors. <sup>55</sup> Solid evidence that the Guptas accepted the traditional belief that the king is chosen by Śrī Lakṣmī appears in one of the major inscriptions of the Emperor Skandagupta.

<sup>53</sup> Saraswati, B., History of the Worship of Śrī in North India to Cir. A.D. 550. Thesis presented to the University of London, Faculty of Arts, 1971, pp. 136-7.

<sup>54</sup> The earliest textual reference to Sri's marriage to the king occurs in the Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa, 2,4,4,6.

<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the best known svamamvara is Draupadi's selection of Arjuna in the Mahābhārata.

The passage in question runs as follows:

...Skandagupta whom the goddess of fortune and splendour (Lakṣmī) of her own accord selected as her husband, having in succession (and) with judgment skillfully taken into consideration and thought over all the causes of virtues and faults, (and) having discarded all the other sons of kings (as not coming up to her standard). <sup>56</sup>

Lakṣmī dwells with whomever possesses the maximum amount of śrī-, that indefinable quality characterized by beauty, success and lordship. Both Viṣṇu and the Gupta kings were thought of as śrīmant-, "possessed of śrī". Śrī is used as the personification of sovereignty for the Guptas; their possession of it indicated their fitness to rule. But in the context of kings, Śrī or Lakṣmī is the personification of an abstract noun meaning sovereignty, while in the context of Viṣṇu it is a proper noun. The two are never confused by the Hindus.

Returning to the coins of Samudragupta, there are two other types which deserve special mention in this chapter on Gupta religion. On the "Kacha type", the king is shown holding a standard which supports a wheel, or chakra. <sup>57</sup> The chakra is on a level with the head of the king and the outer ring of his halo touches the rim of the chakra. The legend reads: "Kacha, after conquering the earth, conquers heaven by means of good deeds". <sup>58</sup> The name Kacha was Samudragupta's personal

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<sup>56</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Loc. cit. The Sanskrit word used for heaven in this passage is diva. It was thought that after a chakravartin had conquered earth (India), he would continue with the ultimate conquest, heaven. This conquest was accomplished by merit.

name which he frequently used on his coins. On the reverse side of this coin the goddess Lakṣmī is depicted. The intent of this coin is clearly to portray this Gupta king as a chakravartin, a universal emperor, and the legend of the coin reinforces this impression. Also, the coin serves to associate the king with Viṣṇu, for Viṣṇu was known as Chakrabhrit, the "wielder of the chakra", and the wheel is one of the most prominent Vaiṣṇava symbols.

The final coin of Samudragupta which will be considered in this chapter brings out another side of the religion of the Guptas. This is the "Aśvamedha type" which was struck in order to commemorate Samudragupta's great horse sacrifice. The coin may be described as follows:

The obverse shows 'Horse standing left before a sacrificial post (yupa), from which pennons fly over his back; on some specimens a low pedestal below; beneath horse the letter Si; legend: Rājādhirājah prithivim avitva divam jayatyaprativaryaviryah, "the king of kings, having gained the earth, conquers heaven with his irresistible heroism".

The reverse presents 'the chief-queen standing left wearing loose robe and jewellery, holding chowrie over right shoulder....<sup>59</sup>

The Guptas took great pride in their performance of this royal animal sacrifice. In the inscriptions of his successors, Samudragupta is

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

called the "restorer of the aśvamedha-sacrifice that had long been in abeyance".<sup>60</sup> Samudragupta himself took the title aśvamedha-parakramah, "he who has displayed prowess by a horse-sacrifice".<sup>61</sup> A large Gupta sculpture, now located in the Lucknow museum, probably represents the sacred horse destined for sacrifice.<sup>62</sup>

Animal sacrifice was not only condoned by the Guptas, it was actually encouraged by them. The Guptas made frequent land grants to Brahmins, and we know from references in Kālidāsa that these Brahmanical villages were marked by an abundance of sacrificial posts (yupas).<sup>63</sup> Here we have a point of tension in the religion of the Guptas. For, Bhagavatism with its doctrine of ahimsā was opposed to animal sacrifice, and Viṣṇu, according to this religion reserved his highest region for those who practiced harmlessness to all creatures.<sup>64</sup> However, the followers of Viṣṇu refrained from an open denunciation of Vedic

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Sivaramamurti, C., Some Aspects of Indian Culture, National Museum, New Delhi, 1969.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Upadhyaya, B.S., India in Kālidāsa, S. Chand & Co., Delhi, 1968. p. 324.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

sacrifice, and were generally content to speak about the superiority of bhakti and ahimsa. During the Gupta age, the old and the newer forms of religious practice co-existed amicably. The Guptas could proclaim themselves as the foremost devotees of Viṣṇu and also sponsor animal sacrifices. There is no evidence, however, that the horses or other animals were sacrificed to Viṣṇu. Rather, the sacrifice was a means and an end in itself, the goal of which is power.<sup>65</sup>

In sum, we find that Samudragupta established a pattern of religious practice, not entirely new, which was to be followed fairly closely by his successors. This pattern involved a mixture of Vedic practices, such as the horse sacrifice, and relatively newer bhakti-oriented practices such as the construction and endowment of temples for the worship of Viṣṇu. With the advantage of hindsight, it is possible to detect a movement away from sacrifice and towards devotionism in the reigns of Samudragupta's successors. His successors took the devotional title paramabhāgavata, but this title is never linked with Samudragupta's name. Also, his son Chandragupta II is not credited with the performance of a horse-sacrifice, even though his numerous conquests would have certainly merited one. It is true that Kumāragupta performed the sacrifice and issued a coin commemorating it, but there

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<sup>65</sup>Cf. Hubert, H., and Mauss, M., Sacrifice - Its Nature and Function, trans. Halls, W.D., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964, p. 97ff. These authors argue that the sacrificial victim helps to establish a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds.

does seem to have been less emphasis on sacrifice in the reigns of the later<sup>66</sup> Guptas. The customs of kingship were changing during the Gupta age, and in subsequent Hindu dynasties, especially in the South, the role of the king as the foremost devotee of god was clearly recognized.<sup>66</sup>

In the corpus of extant inscriptions from the reign of Chandragupta II, there is no single work to rival the Allahabad inscription of his father. Many of this emperor's inscriptions are fragmentary, and it is certain that only a fraction of the total number of originals have survived. Two of Chandragupta II's inscriptions command our attention. The first, which dates from around the year 400 A.D., mentions the fact that the king personally visited the temple and monument site at Udaigiri in Central India.<sup>67</sup> This fact is very significant since the hillside at Udaigiri is the site of a monumental relief carving of Varāha, Viṣṇu's incarnation as the boar, in the act of uplifting the earth in the form of a young lady. This unique relief was commissioned during Chandragupta II's extended campaign against the Śaka ruler of Gujarat, King Rudrasimha III.<sup>68</sup> On the basis of

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<sup>66</sup>This evolution, if my observation is correct, is actually an accurate reflection of the religious milieu of the Gupta age which emphasized worship and devotion over sacrifice of the Vedic variety. Cf. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., pp. 173-176. Yet, the horse-sacrifice continued to be performed at various times up to the Muslim conquest.

<sup>67</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>68</sup>What few details that are known of this major campaign are given by Majumdar in The Classical Age, op. cit., p. 19.

this successful campaign, Chandragupta II assumed the title of Vikramāditya. It is probable that the emperor intended the Varāha relief to stand as a celebration of his conquest as well as a glorification of his deity. Today, Udaigiri seems somewhat off the beaten track, but during the Gupta age it was right on a main highway that connects Sāñchi with the city of Videśā.

Chandragupta II seems to have pushed the king's association with Viṣṇu further than the other kings in the dynasty. One remarkable coin minted by Chandragupta II graphically illustrates this fact. It is called the "Chakravikrama type", for the title Chakravikrama, "prowess of the wheel", constitutes the legend of the coin. The face of the coin shows Lord Viṣṇu presenting certain objects to Chandragupta II. The three objects presented by Viṣṇu to the king may represent the three worlds of Hindu cosmology or they may symbolize the three components of sovereignty (prabhuśakti, mantraśakti, and utsahaśakti).<sup>69</sup> The legend of this interesting coin, Chakravikrama, refers both to Viṣṇu and the Gupta king. Vikrama is one of the recognized names of Viṣṇu,<sup>70</sup> but it is also a component of a number of Chandragupta II's names, such as Vikramāditya, Vikramanka, and Simhavikrama.<sup>71</sup> This

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<sup>69</sup>Cf. Altekar, op. cit., pp. xci-xcii.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāman, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>71</sup>Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 56.



coin is a good illustration of a fundamental fact of Gupta kingship; i.e., that the Guptas' authority for temporal rule was drawn from Viṣṇu. The Guptas' attitude towards this god was similar to that of a royal vassal to his overlord.

Another coin issued by Chandragupta II illustrates the close attachment that this king felt toward the goddess Lakṣmī. This coin type is generally referred to as the "couch type", <sup>72</sup> but a better name would be the "lotus type". The emperor is shown at leisure seated on a couch and adorned with fine jewellery, in his right hand he holds a lotus blossom which he is gazing at in a relaxed manner. The reverse side of the coin shows the goddess Lakṣmī seated on a couch holding a lotus blossom in her left hand. Thus, the king's possession of śrī is beautifully illustrated. The lotus blossom is clearly intended to represent Lakṣmī in her aniconic form. What is striking about this coin is the totally informal fashion in which the king is depicted. In its informality, it is reminiscent of the "Lyrist type" <sup>73</sup> coined by Samudragupta which shows the emperor relaxing with his favorite musical instrument. But, this coin of Chandragupta II carries a symbolic message

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<sup>72</sup>Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 53. This is a fairly rare coin which was apparently produced in the first part of Chandragupta II's reign.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

which is not present in the "Lyrist type". This message is basically that the king has attained the wealth and sovereignty symbolized by Lakṣmī and that the goddess resides with the king.

The inscriptions of Chandragupta II and his successors generally begin with a reference to Viṣṇu. This reference is contained in the word siddham which is usually the first word of a Gupta inscription. This word is derived from the root sidh- which means to hit the mark. Fleet translates siddham as "perfection has been attained!", and he points out that siddham is probably a shortened form of the phrase siddham bhāgavata, or, "perfection has been attained by the Divine One!".<sup>74</sup>

It may also be a reference to one of Viṣṇu's many names, Siddhah.<sup>75</sup> It is interesting to note that a similar phrase is used at the commencement of one of Kumāragupta's inscriptions: jitam bhāgavata, or "victory has been attained by the Divine One!".<sup>76</sup> Both of these salutations are indicative of the character of Viṣṇu in the Gupta inscriptions. The idea of total victory, success, the universal conquest associated with Viṣṇu is a regular theme of the Gupta inscriptions. There is also present the suggestion that it has all been achieved and the dharma-state

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<sup>74</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>75</sup>Cf. Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasranāmam, op. cit., p. 307.

<sup>76</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 40.

has become a reality. With a few possible exceptions, the Gupta inscriptions are uniformly optimistic and world-affirming.

One final inscription of the Emperor Chandragupta II should be considered in this chapter. This is the Meharauli iron pillar inscription which dates from very late in the king's reign.<sup>77</sup> The inscription refers to the solid iron pillar as a Viṣṇu-dhvaja, or a Viṣṇu "staff" or "standard".<sup>78</sup> It is one of the most purely religious inscriptions of the Guptas, its object being to stand as a memorial to Viṣṇu. It records that it was erected by the supreme king who had his mind solely fixed on Lord Viṣṇu:

By him, the king, - who attained sole supreme sovereignty in the world, acquired by his own arm and enjoyed for a very long time; (and) who, having the name of Chandra, carried a beauty of countenance like (the beauty of) the full-moon, - having in faith fixed his mind upon (the god) Vishnu, this lofty standard of the divine Vishnu was set up on the hill (called) Vishnupada.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> This pillar inscription presents a number of problems for the historian. Fleet was not sure where to place it in his corpus of inscriptions and he placed it apart from the other inscriptions of Chandragupta II. However, subsequent scholarship has proven that it must belong to this Gupta king for no other king of the age fits the inscription (cf. Mookerji, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-69). There is also the possibility that it was erected by Chandragupta II's son, Kumāragupta, as a memorial to his deceased father (cf. Brown, P., Indian Architecture - Buddhist and Hindu Periods, D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., Bombay, 1971, p. 50).

<sup>78</sup> Originally, the iron pillar probably supported an image of Garuḍa which has since been lost. This form of religious monument is actually a carry-over from the great columns erected by the Emperor Aśoka. Within the religion of Vaiṣṇavism, we find that similar pillars were being erected to Viṣṇu at least as early as the second century B.C., as the Besnagar inscription indicates (cf. Raychaudhuri, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100).

<sup>79</sup> Fleet, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-142.

The Meharauli inscription sheds light on the conception of afterlife in Gupta religion. It is stated in the third line of this work that,

"...the king, as if wearied, has quitted this earth, and has gone to the outer world, moving in (bodily) form to the land of paradise won by the merit of his actions." <sup>80</sup>

This passage may well indicate that Chandragupta II had died prior to the date of the inscription; this is the "natural interpretation" of the passage according to Professor Sircar. <sup>81</sup> What is significant here is the emphasis the Guptas placed on heaven (divam) in their coins and inscriptions. The world of the celestials, or "Indra's abode" as it is called, was the traditional final resting place for great kings from the vedic period onward. The Gupta monarchs did not seek complete liberation from the cycle of existence (samsara). Rather, they sought to continue their royal existence on a higher level which they had won through the merit they amassed on earth. In many ways, the concept of heaven was a very significant factor in Gupta religion. We may conclude that there was not a philosophically oriented religion which stressed the doctrine of rebirth and release, there was an activist faith which stressed heaven as their final reward. In this, the Guptas resemble their vedic predecessors.

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<sup>80</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>81</sup> Sircar, Select Inscriptions..., op. cit., p. 284.

Chandragupta II's son, Kumaragupta I Mahendrāditya, ruled in a time, c. 414-455 A.D., of peace and prosperity at least up to the very end of his reign when India was again threatened by invasions from the North. Whereas his father's chosen deity (ista devatā) seems to have been the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu, Kumārāgupta was very partial to the man-lion incarnation. One of this emperor's favourite coin-types, judging from the number still in existence, is the "lion-slayer" type which carries the following message:

"Like God Narasimha in flesh and blood,  
King Siṃha-Mahendra is ever-victorious." 82

Another closely related coin type is called the "lion-trampler" type, and its legend is translated as follows:

"Narasimha as it were incarnate, (the king)  
Mahendra (as it were) among the lions, is  
ever-victorious." 83

Both avatāras, Varāha and Narasimha, were doers rather than thinkers or teachers. They acted swiftly and surely for the maintenance of dharma in the world. These mythological heroes suited the Guptas very well. Unlike the Emperor Aśoka, the Guptas never attempted to preach dharma to their subjects. They, unlike the avatāras they associated

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<sup>82</sup> Mookerji, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>83</sup> Altekar, op. cit., p. cv.

themselves with, were primarily doers rather than teachers.<sup>84</sup>

The inscriptions of Kumāragupta are rather disappointing considering the emperor's long reign. We possess only a few genuine inscriptions and these tend to be generally uninformative concerning the religious activities and attitudes of the king. However, we do know that he, like his father, took the title paramabhāgavat, and that he commenced some of his inscriptions with the salutation jitam bhāgavat, or "Victory has been achieved by the Divine One (Viṣṇu)".<sup>85</sup> It is also known that he continued his father's campaign of temple construction throughout the empire. He was apparently very even-handed in dealing with the heterodox religions. He celebrated a horse-sacrifice toward the end of his reign, and struck a coin to commemorate it. But, the exact nature of the conquests which preceded it, if any, is unknown.<sup>86</sup>

When we turn to the last of the great Gupta monarchs, Skandagupta, the picture brightens considerably, for we have some interesting coin types as well as two long inscriptions. Skandagupta added a new type of coin design to the Gupta coins with his introduction of the "King and Lakṣmī" type.<sup>87</sup> This type shows the emperor holding a bow (suggestive of Viṣṇu) standing next to Śrī Lakṣmī with a garuḍa-standard in the

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<sup>84</sup> An example of an avatāra who came to teach as well as act is, of course, Kṛṣṇa. Eloquent discourses befit an anthropomorphic avatāra more than his theriomorphic counterpart.

<sup>85</sup> Fleet, op. cit., pp. 40-41.

<sup>86</sup> Mookerji, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

center background. The female figure has been identified as the goddess Lakṣmī instead of the chief queen for the following three reasons: (1) the figure holds a lotus blossom which is Lakṣmī's symbol; (2) the figure closely resembles Lakṣmī as she appears on the back of Gupta coins; and, (3) Skandagupta claimed a special relationship with Lakṣmī which is mentioned in his inscriptions.<sup>88</sup> This is the first time the goddess is shown in human form at the side of the king. It will be recalled that on the "couch type" coin of Chandragupta II the king is shown fondly holding a lotus representing Lakṣmī, but this coin of his grandson goes one step beyond this and represents the king and the goddess together.

There are certain historical circumstances which may account for the production of the "King and Lakṣmī" type. It is a matter of historical fact that the Gupta empire was threatened by disturbances during the final years of Kumāragupta's rule.<sup>89</sup> Evidently, the young Skandagupta was able to overcome the enemy or enemies which had endangered the stability of the empire. When he returned from his successful cam-

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 98; and, Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>89</sup> According to the inscriptions, the attacking tribe were called Pushyamitras. Cf. Smith, op. cit., p. 172.

paign, his father had already died and he went on to assume the throne.<sup>90</sup>

The main evidence for this scenario of events comes from the Bhitari pillar inscription, a portion of which reads as follows:

Who when (his) father had attained the skies,  
conquered (his) enemies by the strength of  
(his) own arm, and established again the  
ruined fortunes of (his) lineage; and then,  
crying "the victory has been achieved", betook  
himself to (his) mother, whose eyes were full  
of tears from joy, just as Krishna, when he  
had slain his enemies, betook himself to  
(his mother) Devaki.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, it is possible that Skandagupta ordered the "King and Lakṣmī coin struck in celebration of his victories and his assumption of the throne. In another of this king's inscriptions it is said that Lakṣmī, the goddess of fortune and splendour, selected Skandagupta to be the supreme king after she had examined all the other candidates and found that they did not measure up to her standards.<sup>92</sup>

The passage quoted above brings out another significant aspect of Gupta kingship. This is the fact that the Guptas consistently portrayed their actions in a mythological context. Mythological allusions to the rich Hindu pantheon appear very frequently in Gupta inscriptions.

<sup>90</sup>It is considered probable by scholars that Skandagupta was not the son of Kumāragupta's chief queen and that he had to fight several rivals before gaining the throne. Cf. The Classical Age, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

<sup>91</sup>Fleet, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 62.



Samudragupta outshone Prthu in giving gold; Chandragupta II was like the great boar incarnation uplifting the endangered earth; Kumaragupta was like Narasimha incarnate; Skandagupta was like Kṛṣṇa returning to Devakī after destroying his enemies; etc.. These examples could easily be multiplied. The comparisons between the Guptas and mythological beings are more than extravagant poetical devices. Taking an Eliadean approach, we may explain them by saying that kingship for the Guptas meant "... living in accordance with extrahuman models, in conformity with archetypes".<sup>93</sup> The great drama of Vaiṣṇava mythology provided an excellent background for the Guptas. They drew upon it so heavily because it helped to make their kingship more real and give it a timeless dimension. The state which they sought, the dharma-state, was, to use Dr. Arapura's phrase, a "realm of innocence".<sup>94</sup> Their identification with timeless models gave the Guptas the pure and innocent quality required of a leader in the dharma-state.

At this point, it is possible to make a few general conclusions about the religion of the Gupta kings. The first and most obvious conclusion is that they were Hindus, or, in their view, followers of the sanātana dharma which stems from the path of the sacred hymns (Vedas).

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<sup>93</sup> Eliade, M. Cosmos and History - The Myth of the Eternal Return, Harper & Row, New York, 1959, p. 95.

<sup>94</sup> Arapura, J. G., Religion as Anxiety and Tranquillity, Mouton, The Hague, 1972. p. 108.

We have found that their brand of Hinduism was a mixture of Vedic Brahmanism and Vaiṣṇavism. In terms of the three paths of Hinduism, they combine the karma-marga, the way of sacrifice and good deeds, with the bhakti-marga, the way of devotion to a personal god.

It goes almost without saying that religion was a very important consideration for the Guptas. It helped to support their far-flung empire both on a conceptual and a practical level. The most important function of the state, according to a view shared by Hinduism and Buddhism, is the establishment and maintenance of dharma in the land. Obedience to the state was regarded as obedience to dharma.<sup>95</sup> Thus, religion in its broadest sense was a paramount concern for the Guptas, as it was for any dynasty in ancient India. The king had the responsibility for the spiritual as well as the material well-being of his people. This is why Skandagupta could make the following boast with obvious pride:

While he, the king, is reigning, verily no man  
among his subjects falls away from religion  
(dharma)....<sup>96</sup>

Our second general conclusion sounds simplistic but it is actually an important consideration. This is the fact that the Guptas

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Jauhari, M., Politics and Ethics in Ancient India, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, Varanasi, 1968. p. 122.

<sup>96</sup> Fleet, op. cit., p. 62.

followed a special kind of religion, within the fold of Hinduism, which was reserved for kings alone in ancient India.<sup>97</sup> This branch of religion entailed its own set of sacrifices, rituals, and ethics which were not applicable to other members of society. A sacrifice such as the horse-sacrifice could only be performed by a powerful king. Great acts of munificence such as giving away hundreds of thousands of cows to Brahmans and the construction of hundreds of temples could only be accomplished by a king. It was part of his dharma to be generous to a fault. One of the most interesting of the royal sacrifices, called the viśvajit, required the king to give away everything that he owned with the exception of the earth itself which is not really his to give away.<sup>98</sup> This "religion of kings" was also a factor in the Guptas' conception of afterlife. As we have noted, the Guptas sought heaven (divam) and not nirvāṇa like the proverbial candle going out.

In sum, to say that the Guptas were Vaiṣṇavas is basically a correct statement, but it does not tell the whole story. We find

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<sup>97</sup>The traditional name for this special branch of rājadharmā. It contained its own appropriate science called kṣatriyavidyā.

<sup>98</sup>Cf. Spellman, op. cit., p. 204.

little in common between the Vaiṣṇavism of the Guptas and the Vaiṣṇavism that was being practiced in village India at the same time. There were certain roles to be played within the tradition. The role of a Hindu cakravartin called for a spectacular individual, and the Guptas played this role with great enthusiasm and ability.



## CHAPTER VII

### MONARCHY AND THE WORSHIP OF VISNU

In the preceding chapter, the Guptas' association with Vaiṣṇavism was discussed in detail. In the present chapter, we shall discuss the possible impact of Gupta kingship on the religion of Vaiṣṇavism. Vaiṣṇavism of the Gupta age reflects the impress of a strong monarchical system of government. Viṣṇu was conceived as a universal emperor, his temples were designed as palaces, he is approached by the devotee as one would approach a great monarch, etc.. Moreover, the cosmos was seen as a vast kingdom, and the temporal state governed by the Guptas was conceived as an integrated level of the vaster kingdom governed by Viṣṇu. The land which made up the empire was sacred space: āryāvarta, the pure land inhabited by noble people. All of these factors played their part in the religion which centered around Viṣṇu, the protector of all. The major elements of Viṣṇu worship, the devotional images, the temples, and the rituals, were patterned after the customs related to the institution of kingship. Naturally, this type of religion would tend to re-inforce and support the political order of the day. Conversely, the state did its part in promoting and supporting the religion. In order to substantiate this hypothesis, the central elements of the Viṣṇu cult, including the sacred image, the

temple, and the ritual, will be examined in this chapter.

We shall begin with a brief study of the iconography of Viṣṇu in Gupta times. Our purpose here is simply to demonstrate that Viṣṇu was represented in the form of a great king, or cakravartin.

The form assigned to Viṣṇu for worship and meditation is highly significant. The artists and the visionaries who wrote the texts on image making attempted to reify Viṣṇu's abstract qualities and place them on an anthropomorphic form. The central qualities (guṇas) of this god are as follows: jñāna (knowledge), aiśvarya (lordship), śakti (ability or potency), bala (strength), vīrya (virility), and tejas (splendour).<sup>1</sup> The statue of Viṣṇu conveys these abstract and transcendental qualities in an ingenious fashion. The qualities of strength, ability, and virility are expressed by the youthful, muscular physique imparted to the statue. The quality of lordship is expressed by the rich ornamentation which decorates the statue, including the crown which may only be worn by a cakravartin. In addition, the paramount quality of knowledge may be expressed by the slight smile on the statue's face which is found on examples from the Gupta age.

In his anthropomorphic form, Viṣṇu is generally represented

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Banerjea, op. cit., p. 387.

with four arms.<sup>2</sup> The artists used the four hands to carry the well-known emblems of Viṣṇu: the cakra, śāṅkha, gada, and padma. Three out of four of these emblems are related to warfare and the ksatriya class. The cakra, in addition to being a symbol of sovereignty, was used as a weapon in ancient India. The śāṅkha, or conch shell, was blown by Viṣṇu before a battle, an act which struck terror in his enemies.<sup>3</sup> The gada is a battle club used to strike an enemy at close range. The lotus which is often found in the hands of Viṣṇu is a symbol of Śrī-Lakṣmī, and, in a broader sense, a symbol of fertility. Thus, the emblems borne by Viṣṇu are related to the functions of a king -- protection and insurance of prosperity.

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<sup>2</sup>One of the earliest examples of the four-armed statues of Viṣṇu is found on the right facade of the "Chandragupta II" cave at Udaigiri, dated c. 400 A.D.. As Banerjea noted, this statue agrees very closely with the description of the four-armed Viṣṇu given in the Bṛhatsaṃhitā which was composed about the year 580 A.D.. The passage in question (chap. 57, vv., 31-5) is translated as follows:

"Eight, four, or two should be the number of Viṣṇu's hands; his breast should be adorned with the śrīvatsa mark and the kaustubha jewel; his colour should be that of the atasi flower (yellowish green), he should wear yellowish garments, ear-rings, jewelled crown...."

The proper name for this jewelled crown is kirīṭa-mukuta. The kundalas, or ear-rings, were also customarily worn by kings. Cf. Banerjea, op. cit., p. 396.

<sup>3</sup>The use of the conch shell in warfare is alluded to in the first chapter, verse sixteen, of the Bhagavadgītā, when the Pandavas blow their specially named conches.



There are some very interesting antecedents to the iconography of Viṣṇu in Gupta art. We find that, as early as the second century B.C., legendary mahārājas were represented in Buddhist art in a fashion which resembles the treatment of Viṣṇu in Gupta times. These kings, or cakkavattis, play a major role in the Jātaka tales, and they were frequently represented in the reliefs which adorn Buddhist sites. One of the best examples of the Buddhist cakkavatti type is found in a well-executed relief from the Jagayyapetta stupa, near Amarāvati, which was constructed in the second century B.C..<sup>4</sup> This piece of art is a beautiful illustration of the world of a wheel-turning king:

The suzerain ruler stands with his right hand upraised as if to give assurance to his numerous subjects; he holds the jewel (maṇi) in his left hand, and the six other jewels (in all seven jewels, sapta ratnani), viz., wheel (cakra) queen consort (stri), horse (aśva), elephant (hasti), chancellor (grhapati) and commander-in-chief (parinayaka) cluster round him. The royal umbrella (chatra, the Indian insignia par excellence for paramountcy, such a sovereign is called Chatrapati) is placed over his head.<sup>5</sup>

The right hand of the cakkavatti is touching a cloud at the top of the relief, thus causing rain, or money, to flow down. His facial expression is benign and calm. It seems to express an assurance that all is in accordance with dharma in his realm.

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Rowland, B., The Art and Architecture of India. Penguin Books, London, 1967. p. 55.

<sup>5</sup>Banerjea, op. cit., p. 427.

In addition to exhibiting a general similarity to the standardized Viṣṇu image, the cakkavatti<sup>1</sup> also bears two symbols which are very important in the Viṣṇu iconography: the cakra and the gada. The queen at the side of the cakkavatti is the same size in proportion to the king as Viṣṇu's consorts are depicted alongside the god.<sup>6</sup> In each case, the female is very small in proportion to the center of attraction in the image.

On the basis of their numerous similarities, it is probable that Viṣṇu's iconography was based on the prototype of the cakkavatti as depicted in early Buddhist art.<sup>7</sup> This is actually a natural development, for Viṣṇu was thought to possess the attributes of a universal emperor on a cosmic scale. A set conception of the appearance of a wheel-turning king existed in India, and it seemed appropriate to represent Viṣṇu in accordance with this conception. Without carrying the argument to extremes, we may simply state that the image of Viṣṇu, as worshipped in the Gupta age, was the embodiment of a divine universal monarch.

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Rao, op. cit., Vol. I, pt. 1, plate XXI.

<sup>7</sup>The great cakkavatti named Mandhata, who is probably represented in the relief from Jagayyapetta, was later considered to have been an avatāra of Viṣṇu. This assertion is made in the Matsyapurāṇa, chapter 47, verse 106. Thus, Vaiṣṇavas claimed legendary Buddhist wheel-turners as manifestations of their god, just as they later claimed the Buddha himself as an avatāra. Cf. Banerjea, op. cit., p. 427.

The devotional image of Viṣṇu differs in one respect from the Buddhist representations of cakkavattis. This difference stems from the fact that the image of Viṣṇu was thought to contain the actual presence of Viṣṇu whereas the cakkavatti relief was intended as an illustration of a theme. This difference brings up another aspect of Vaiṣṇavism which was affected by a monarchical way of thinking. That is, the image was consecrated and treated with full royal regalia.

There are basically two varieties of image worship: domestic and temple pūjā. For household worship, the image would be "activated" and "deactivated" for each act of worship, while, for temple worship, the image would be consecrated only once in a grand ceremony which invited the deity to take up residence in the image. The earliest texts which discuss image worship, such as the Viṣṇu Dharmasāstra (c. 2nd century A.D.), mention domestic pūjā only. However, in many of the Purāṇas and Pāñcharāta saṃhitās there are extensive discussions of temple worship. This indicates that there was a growing popularity of temple worship between the third and sixth centuries A.D., sparked in part by royal patronage.

One of the most helpful texts on image worship in the Gupta age is the Vaiṣṇava work entitled the Paramasamhitā which was probably composed in the late sixth century A.D.<sup>8</sup> The Paramasamhitā makes it

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 42.

clear that the deity cannot be forced to reside in a given image. On the contrary, it is said that Viṣṇu comes to the image by an act of grace:

That God is neither established, nor protected by anyone. For the purposes of worship alone, He lends himself, by an act of grace, to His devotees.<sup>9</sup>

Viṣṇu was thought to enter an image in a temple by his own volition. Therefore, everything about the image, the temple, and the surroundings must be perfect in order to be attractive to the deity. A mistake could result in disaster for all those involved in the temple project.<sup>10</sup>

Once the image has been duly consecrated according to the prescribed mantras, it is treated as the living embodiment of Viṣṇu. The image is carefully bathed, given new clothes, decked with ornaments, and made to lie on a soft perfumed couch.<sup>11</sup> The image of Viṣṇu is presented with regalia including an umbrella, fly-whisks, and a canopy.<sup>12</sup> When an image of Viṣṇu is installed in a temple, it is mandatory that generous gifts be made to all people involved in the project, especially the Brahmins. This rule seems to be a carry-

<sup>9</sup>Paramasamhitā, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>10</sup>The danger here, if a mistake is made, is that the temple will become the abode of undesirable beings such as rakshasas and piśāchas instead of Viṣṇu. Cf. Paramasamhitā, op. cit., p. 121.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>12</sup>Loc. cit.

over from the vedic custom of dakṣina, donations to Brahmins following a major sacrifice.

If one makes gifts of money with discrimination among the deserving, and provides food and drink for all, he is doing what would please Hari [Viṣṇu].

If one should install God in a new temple, without giving these various gifts, he is afflicted with disease and his relations cause him fear.

Therefore a wise man, for his own prosperity, will install Achyuta [Viṣṇu] in a new temple, providing a plentiful supply of food and drink, accompanied with money gifts.<sup>13</sup>

The origins of the consecration ceremony are obscure, but it is probable that it was borrowed from earlier vedic rituals. Louis Renou has made the interesting suggestion that, "...it may go back to an ancient hospitality rite; it resembles the ceremonies depicting the reception of King Soma, at the beginning of the Agnistoma."<sup>14</sup> This is certainly true, but, in many respects there are even greater similarities with another well-known vedic sacrifice for the installation of a new king, the rājasūya.<sup>15</sup> This sacrifice which is frequently mentioned in the Yajus-samhitās and the Brāhmaṇas, sought to instill

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Renou, L., Religions of Ancient India, Schocken Books, New York, 1970, pp. 80-81. For a discussion of the Agnistoma, cf. Kane, op. cit., Vol. II, pt. 2, pp. 1133-1203.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Heesterman, J., The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration, Mouton & Co., s'Gravenhage, 1957.

royal authority in the king through a ritual which transferred some of the functions and epithets of the gods to the sacrificer.<sup>16</sup>

The image consecration ceremony employs some of the same procedures as the rājasūya ritual. The central ceremony in each case takes a full five days to perform.<sup>17</sup> The essential part of each ceremony is the abhiśeka ritual in which the consecrated object, king or image, is annointed with holy water drawn from sacred pools and rivers.<sup>18</sup> Other striking similarities between the two rituals are: the presentation of new clothing, the central importance of mantras in working the transformation, the all-around festive atmosphere of the event, and, the final generous gifts to the Brahmans without which the ceremony would not be complete. There is also a symbolism of rebirth common to both rituals. These similarities, coupled with Viṣṇu's pronounced association with the institution of kingship, make it probable that the image consecration ritual was patterned after the ancient Indian coronation ceremony. This hypothesis helps to explain many incidental details in the complicated consecration ceremony such as the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kane, op. cit., Vol. II, pt. 2, p. 1216. And, Paramāsamhitā, op. cit., chapter XVIII.

<sup>18</sup> The rājasūya calls for water from seventeen different sources. However, no number of sources is specific for the image consecration.

the presentation of a new pair of sandals to the image of Viṣṇu.<sup>19</sup>

The royal treatment accorded the image in the consecration ceremony is continued in the daily life of the temple. The Paramāsamhitā discusses the worshipper's attitude toward the image of Viṣṇu as follows:

Having uttered a laud of praise, and having bowed in reverence to him in the direction of the image, then going ceremoniously round the image, treat Furushottama [Viṣṇu] as a king and show him honour, as if in fear; then, obtaining his permission with the satva-mantra,<sup>20</sup> protect yourself with the Astra-mantra.

The temple service, as described in this text, is a ritual of honouring the god by mentally washing the deity's feet, rubbing him with fragrant oil, and presenting it with clothing, jewels, bangles, rings, etc.<sup>21</sup> Of all the possible relationships between the deity and the devotee, i.e., father/child, husband/wife, etc., Vaiṣṇavism of the Gupta age emphasized the relationship of king/subject. This fact

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<sup>19</sup> Paramāsamhitā, op. cit., p. 127. Sandals were prominent symbols of sovereignty. Rāma left his sandals by the throne when he went into exile. They stood as a symbolic reminder of his presence to his brother and his subjects.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 133. The manner of approaching the image is very similar to the manner of approaching a king in hopes of a boon. It is interesting that the devotee is instructed to feign fear in the presence of Viṣṇu. It is as if the temple ceremony were a staged performance based on the situation of a loyal and devoted subject petitioning his accomplished monarch for protection and possibly a special favor.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-3.

left its imprint on temple worship in later times. Even today it is recognized that, "In temple worship the deity is treated as a king, and all royal honours are done to it."<sup>22</sup>

The term used to denote offerings to Viṣṇu within a temple is bali-. Here again, there is a suggestion of royal symbolism. For, as Dr. Maity has observed in his study of economic history, bali is "the oldest Indo-Aryan term for royal revenue. In the Rgveda it is the king's due both from his subjects and from conquered kings."<sup>23</sup> By the time of the Guptas, the term bali was used primarily to denote a religious offering to the gods. According to Manu, the householder is required to throw "bali offerings" in all directions of the compass for the sake of the gods who guard the quarters.<sup>24</sup> But, in the same text bali is also used in the sense of a royal tax or tribute paid to the king.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the term had a dual significance: it may mean either a devotional offering or a tax depending on who receives the offering, a god or a king.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Ravi Varma, L.A., "Rituals of Worship", The Cultural Heritage of India, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 447.

<sup>23</sup>Maity, S.K., Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1970, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup>Manu, III, 87.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., VIII, 307, and, IX, 254.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Macdonell, A.A., A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p. 193.



In the inscriptions of the Gupta age, the term bali is used in the religious sense of an offering to a god or gods. As such, it is used in conjunction with the words charu and sattra.<sup>27</sup> Bali consisted of an offering of grain, rice, or ghee to the deity.

The connotation of a royal tax or tribute is not entirely absent in the religious use of the term bali. Just as the bali offering was taken directly to the king and presented to him in person,<sup>28</sup> so the devotee was required to take his bali offering and place it before the image of Viṣṇu. As the Paramāsamhitā informs us, one of the major boons sought by devotees was the protection of Lord Viṣṇu.<sup>29</sup> This was also the case with temporal monarchs. Manu explicitly states that a king who accepts balis, daily presents and fines, and does not offer protection to the people in return will soon sink into hell.<sup>30</sup> Thus, we are able to perceive a fundamental similarity between the ancient royal tax, which may or may not have been voluntary, and the voluntary offerings which the devotees presented to the

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 116. Charu is the oblation of food for ancestors, and sattra is hospitality and asylum for those in need.

<sup>28</sup> Gonda, op. cit., p. 11n.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Paramāsamhitā, op. cit., p. 133ff.

<sup>30</sup> Manu, VIII, 307.

image of Viṣṇu.<sup>31</sup>

The ~~crowning~~ component of the image of Viṣṇu, the temple which enshrines it, also has an ascertainable relationship with the institution of monarchy. Among the various words signifying "temple" in Sanskrit, the word prasāda was most commonly used in Gupta times.<sup>32</sup> The original meaning of this words is a "palace" or "royal mansion". As Dr. Coomaraswamy has pointed out:

Sanskrit prasāda...is constantly employed to designate a mansion, typically of several stories. More often than not the word denotes a palace, or other pretentious dwelling; but elsewhere also a monastery or temple. The term applies always to an entire structure, not to a single storey or terrace.<sup>33</sup>

Coomaraswamy has determined that prasādas intended for kings were constructed on elevated foundations.<sup>34</sup> He adds:

The texts do not speak of entering or leaving a palace, but always of going up or coming down from it.<sup>35</sup>

In a similar fashion, the Gupta temples and later Hindu temples in

<sup>31</sup>The protection which Lord Viṣṇu afforded was protection against the unseen forces which threaten man, while the king's protection covered the visable threats.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Shastri, op. cit., p. 394.

<sup>33</sup>Coomaraswamy, A.K., "Early Indian Architecture: Palaces", Eastern Art, Vol. I-II, 1931, p. 181.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

general were constructed on an elevated foundation which is called an adhiṣṭhana in Sanskrit. Preceding the central chamber of the temple, there was usually an anteroom or porch. And, we find that Āpastamba mentions that in front of a king's palace there should be a "hall of invitation" through which subjects must pass before viewing their king.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the sacred chamber of the temple which houses the image of Viṣṇu (garbhagriha) has certain affinities with the king's throne room (siri-gabha). Other temple details, such as the presence of guardian figures on the sides of the temple doorway, may also allude to the customs of a royal palace.

In sum, our findings indicate that the central components of temple-worship, specifically Vaiṣṇava worship, were patterned after the customs and concepts of kingship. The Vaiṣṇava temples housed a deity who was conceived of as a cosmic ruler. Therefore, the royal symbolism that surrounded all aspects of the temple cult was natural and appropriate. In the minds of their subjects, some of whom were prone to a republican form of government, the temples of Viṣṇu helped to re-inforce the idea that monarchy was the dharmic universal form of government. Thus, it was advantageous for the Guptas to sponsor the construction of literally hundreds of temples

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Āpastamba, II, 4.

throughout their empire. However, there is one more aspect of this phenomenon which must be discussed before we reach our conclusions.

When the Guptas, or one of their tributary lords patronized the construction of a temple, it was customary to grant lands and/or a village(s) for the maintenance of the temple and the deity. Often, the inscription which confirmed the grant lists certain Brahmans and their families to act as administrators of the temple, lands, villages, and villagers.<sup>37</sup> The inscriptions point to the fact that the construction of temples was closely linked with the landgrants to Brahmans, called brahmadeya grants.

As we have noted in the first part of the thesis, the practice of granting tax-free lands to Brahmans has a long history in India. It was known at least as early as the period of the Dharmaśūtras (c. 600-300 B.C.), for the work of Āpastamba states that a king who gives land and money to Brahmans according to their deserts gains "endless worlds".<sup>38</sup> A more extensive definition of the brahmadeya grant system is contained in the Arthaśāstra of Kautilya:

Those who perform sacrifices (rtvik), spiritual guides, priests, and those learned in the Vedas shall be granted Brahmadeya lands yielding sufficient produce and exempted from taxes and fines (adaṇḍkarani).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Fleet, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> Āpastamba, II, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Arthaśāstra, II, 1, 46. trans. Shamasastri, op. cit., p. 45.

In this passage, we have an accurate outline of the operation of brahmadeya grants in ancient India. One variation of the system is found in the Gupta age and in subsequent times when land is granted in the name of a deity with the proviso that the holdings be administered by a certain family of Brahmins.<sup>40</sup> For all practical purposes, granting the land to a god functioned the same as granting the land directly to Brahmins. Both customs appear to have co-existed in Gupta times.<sup>41</sup>

A noteworthy aspect of the brahmadeya grant system is the nearly complete immunity and independence which was assured to the recipients of the grant. The lands and villages granted under this system were free from taxation and entry by the king's army. The exact nature of the freedoms enjoyed by the Brahmins holding a brahmadeya grant are set forth in an inscription of Pravarasena II, Chandragupta II's grandson and Vākāṭaka ruler from 410 to c. 437 A.D.:

Now we grant the fixed usage, such as benefits this (village), (and) such as has been approved of by former kings, of a village which belongs to a community of Chaturvedins; namely, it is not to pay taxes; it is not to be entered by the regular troops or by the umbrella bearers; it does not carry with it (the right to) cows and bulls in succession of production, or to the abundance of flowers and milk, or to the pasturage, hides,

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Fleet, *op. cit.*, p. 123, where a village is granted as an agrahara of Viṣṇu to a certain group of Brahmins who will administer it for Viṣṇu.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

and charcoal, or to the mines for the purchase of salt in a moist state; it is entirely free from (all obligation of) forced labor; it carries with it the hidden treasures and deposits, ...it is (to be enjoyed) for the same time with the moon and the sun; (and) it is to follow (the succession of) sons and sons' sons. No hinderance should be caused by anyone to those who enjoy it. It should be protected and increased by all (possible) means. And whosoever, disregarding this charter, shall give, or cause to be given, even slight vexation, We will inflict on him punishment, together with a fire, when he is denounced by the Brahmins.<sup>42</sup>

There were a few important conditions imposed on the Brahmins who accepted a brahmadeya grant from the king. These conditions were imposed in order to keep a measure of control over the brahmadeya villages. The limitations of a brahmadeya grant are set forth in the following passage from Pravarasena's inscription:

And this condition of the charter should be maintained by the Brahmins and by (future) lords; namely (the enjoyment of this grant is to belong to the Brahmins) for the same time with the moon and sun, provided that they commit no treason against the kingdom, consisting of seven constituent parts, of (successive) kings; that they are not slayers of Brahmins, and are not thieves, adulterers, poisoners of kings, etc.; that they do not wage war; (and) that they do no wrong to other villagers. But, if they act otherwise, or assent (to such acts), the king will commit no theft in taking the land away.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Fleet, *op. cit.*, p. 242. The Vākāṭaka kingdom was, at the time of this grant, under the hegemony of the Gupta empire. It is very probable that the same stipulations applied to Brahmins within the other sections of the empire.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

Thus, the villages and lands given to Brahmans cannot be considered as separate islands totally apart from the king's land around them. As long as they commit no treason or try to assemble an army, etc., they were granted independence from taxes, forced labour, etc. However, it is certain that the king expected some positive results from his construction of temples and land-grants to Brahmans. In the first place, the king gained religious merit and a reputation for generosity by making these bequests. In the second place, the Brahmans favoured with brahmadeya grants helped to stabilize the king's control of the region. For, these Brahmans were definitely oriented towards a monarchical system of government and their loyalties would lie with their benefactor. The Brahmans also helped to ensure that law and order of the varnadharma variety was maintained in their holdings. Thus, the system had many advantages for the king which are not immediately apparent.<sup>44</sup>

In his work on Indian feudalism, Professor Sharma traces the development of feudalism in India to the brahmadeya grant system which, he contends, became very popular in Northern India under the Guptas.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Sharma, Aspects of Political Ideas, op. cit., p. 257. One of these hidden advantages of the system concerns money. The temples and land holdings of Brahmans amassed huge sums of money and valuables, and the king could, if the times demanded it, seize these funds in order to protect the state. Thus, they were akin to reserve banks.

<sup>45</sup> Sharma, R.S., Indian Feudalism: c. 300-1200, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1965, p. 263.

He compares the Guptas' practice with the benefices given to the Church in mediaeval Europe, but he is careful to point out that the Brahmans of India were not an organized group like the Catholic Church of Europe.<sup>46</sup> In this manner, a seemingly non-governmental activity such as a massive program of temple construction is tied to a very important feature of Gupta imperialism: the brahmadeya grant system.

We are now in a position to summarize the findings of this chapter. In regard to the material elements of Gupta Vaiṣṇavism, such as the devotional images, temples, etc., we have found that they all reflect the impress of the institution of kingship. Ksatra, the divine quality of dominion and power, was celebrated on a grand scale in this religion. And, we find that the Brahmans, the traditional arbiters of spiritual authority, actually lead the celebration of kingship.

The Brahmans appeared to be content with the security and prosperity that Gupta sovereignty brought to them. The result of their solid support of Gupta kingship was that kingship became sacred. Both the Guptas and the Brahmans attempted to invest the state with an ethos that went beyond mere loyalty to a particular king or dynasty. The key term to understanding this phenomenon, in my opinion, is bhakti.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 271. For several reasons, the term "feudalism" is not the most accurate description of the Indian system of land distribution. It is a term which accurately describes the European system of political organization from the 9th to the 15th centuries, but India was not the same.



Bhakti, devotion or loyalty, governed the relationship between the king and his subjects and between the people and god. Without this element, Gupta kingship as well as Gupta Vaiṣṇavism would have lacked cohesion. In directing bhakti to Viṣṇu and his consort Śrī Lakṣmī, the Guptas had discovered immortal symbols of unity and validation for their empire.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the material gathered in the preceding chapters, we may now reach our conclusions on the nature and development of the institution of kingship prior to and including the time of the Guptas. The central concern of the thesis is the religious conception of kingship in the Gupta age. But, in order to place this concern in the proper perspective, it has been necessary to discuss the development of the institution of kingship from the vedic period down to the Gupta age. Only in this fashion is it possible to see the ways in which the Guptas were conservative and the ways in which they were innovative.

In many respects, the Vedas laid the foundation for a conception of kingship which continued for many centuries after the historical conditions reflected in the Vedas had vanished. The thesis has demonstrated that this conception underwent a progressive re-interpretation and responded to changing political and religious attitudes. But, the re-interpretations were generally evolutionary rather than revolutionary.<sup>1</sup> Thus, several important royal rituals

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this general rule is found in the case of Buddhism which questioned some of the fundamental presuppositions of the vedic understanding of kingship.

and sacrifices such as the consecration ceremony and the horse sacrifice were scrupulously retained by later Indian kings who expressed a great deal of pride in these activities. More fundamentally, a certain way of viewing the king and his relation to his subjects seems to have been handed down from vedic times onward. In this view, the king is a mighty-armed warrior who stands as the principle opposing force to the enemies of society. The nature of these "enemies" changed over the years: from dāśas to foreigners (mlecchas), etc., but the pattern remained the same. The king stood as a symbol for the people in vedic times as in Gupta times. As such, the king was alluded to as the visible representative of god on earth. In vedic times, the king was associated primarily with Indra, but Varuna and Prajāpati also played major roles in regard to kingship. In post-vedic times, the prime deity associated with kingship became Viṣṇu. However, the basic pattern, i.e., the king as a representative or human "embodiment" of god, continued along lines first suggested in the Vedas.

We have seen that a given king was not automatically considered as divine in the early vedic period. Divinity could be earned, however, by kings such as Trasadasyu. A king could win divine status primarily on the battlefield. Thus, this type of divinity can be described as an acquired status rather than an ascribed status.<sup>2</sup> Progressively, later texts dealing with kingship, especially

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Linton, R., The Study of Man, Macmillan & Co., New York City, 1936.

the Dharmaśāstras and the Epics, moved in the direction of a doctrine of ascribed divinity. By the time of the law book of Nārada, c. 400 A.D., the king is automatically considered as a divine person, and listed among the eight sacred objects on earth.<sup>3</sup> One may conclude that the development of the conception of kingship in ancient India tended to gravitate toward apotheosis of the king. A true king could be considered divine, but a false king (a tyrant, atheist, etc.) was considered a demon. In this fashion, the ancient thinkers allied the two types of kings with the two opposing cosmic forces discussed in the Vedas: the devas and the asuras.

The second chapter of the thesis discussed two alternative conceptions of kingship which cannot be considered as "vedic" in nature. Both of these views, the Arthaśāstric and the Buddhist, date from the second and third centuries B.C., a time of extensive political and philosophic speculation. We have seen that these distinctive viewpoints differed on their interpretations of kingship. Kautilya's work is representative of a large body of works on statecraft, many of which have been lost. The author of the Arthaśāstra intended the work to be a summary of previous works on the subject, but the work is much more than a mere summary of the science. It speaks with a note

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<sup>3</sup> Nārada, XVIII, 54.

of authority all its own. The works which Kautilya claims to have summarized have disappeared so that it is now very difficult to determine the degree of originality of the work as we have it today. At any rate, we are safe in treating the Arthasāstra as the major text on ancient Indian statecraft. It made a fundamental impress on the entire field as evinced by the respect which later thinkers such as Kamandaka grant it.

The king was the most important component of the state according to the Arthasāstra. Consequently, Kautilya devotes a great deal of attention to the person, customs, and deportment of the king. We have seen that Kautilya is a bit ambivalent on the question of the king's divinity. On the one hand, he acknowledges that a doctrine of a royal divinity is useful for it helps to strengthen the hand of the king throughout the land. Therefore, he recommends that spies be sent forth to stage debates among the people in order to prove the king's divinity and warn people of divine punishment if they despised or disobeyed the king.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the king is referred to as a wage-earner (tulyavetana) in a passage in which a doctrine of royal divinity is decidedly absent.<sup>6</sup> We may conclude, therefore, that Kautilya wanted the "lowly folk" to accept the king

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<sup>4</sup> Arthasāstra, I, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., X, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., X, 3.

as a divine person, but, at the same time, he acknowledged the doctrine of mundane kingship in which the king is a "wage-earner" of the state. He does not hold to a consistent theory of kingship. Rather, he accepts those views of kingship which will help to strengthen the hand of the king in a given situation.

We have seen how the Buddhist view of kingship presented a challenge to the traditional views held by the Brahmins. The Buddhists flatly denied the view that all kings are divine or that a king can become divine through valour on the battle field. They had a very low opinion of the science of kingship (kṣatriyavidya) which they felt was not consistent with Righteousness as it was taught by the Buddha. Yet, kingship was a major concern for the early Buddhists, and they sought to bring kingship and dharma together in the person of a perfect monarch or cakkavatti. The authority of such a king is based on righteousness rather than might. His main purpose is the promotion of the dharma throughout this territory, and his notion of conquest is limited to moral conquest achieved by his spiritual merit. This is admittedly a very idealistic conception of kingship on the part of the Buddhists. They placed their ideal conception of a cakkavatti almost on a par with the venerated founder of their religion, the Buddha. As such, a true Buddhist cakkavatti could be considered greater than a god (deva) in the estimation of Buddhists, for the gods were valued quite low in comparison with the Buddha. Thus, while denying the traditional doctrine of royal divinity, the

Buddhists effectively elevated the status of a righteous (i.e., "true") king by making him a powerful and necessary instrument of the dharma.

In the reign of the famous Mauryan Emperor Aśoka two non-vedic views of kingship were evident. These were (a) the Buddhist, and, (b) the Persian. The Buddhist influence is very evident in the content of Aśoka's inscriptions, and the Persian influence is evident in the form and implementation of the inscriptions themselves. It is in the field of art and architecture that the Persian influence on Mauryan India is most apparent. Aśoka's impressive palace at Pāṭaliputra follows the same pattern as the royal palace at Persepolis, and even the polishing technique used on the pillars seems to have been a Persian import.<sup>7</sup> These examples could easily be multiplied. Moreover, it is possible that the concept of "universal dominion", i.e., the kernel of the chakravartin ideal, originally came to India from Persia. Although this proposition is ultimately impossible to prove, it is reasonable to suppose that early Indian thinkers were influenced by the historical example of great Persian kings such as Cyrus (558-30 B.C.). Yet, one must add that the concept was swiftly "Indianized" within the bounds of India. Aśokan kingship,

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Jāirāzbhoy, R.A., Foreign Influence in Ancient India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, pp. 44-45.

with its strong Buddhist overtones, is dissimilar to the pretenses of Persian kingship. The basic idea of universal dominion is the same, but the religious interpretation of this idea was decidedly different in India.

Asoka certainly made a major contribution to the evolving conception of the nature of perfect kingship in India, but it is difficult to assess the extent of his contribution. After him, we find a greater emphasis on the chakravartin ideal of universal conquest with dharma on the part of Hindu thinkers. Yet, Asoka is not mentioned in the inscriptions of subsequent dynasties such as the Guptas. Rather, these inscriptions refer to legendary kings such as Rāma and Pṛthu. The reason behind this, I believe, lies not in the fact that Asoka was forgotten (his columns, inscriptions, and palace were too visible for this), but in the fact that he was viewed as a heterodox king whose actions were not in the best interests of the traditional order of Hindu society.

When we turn our attention to the great epics, we discover a conception of kingship which shows the influence of all of the preceding views yet retains a distinct character of its own. In comparison with the Arthasāstra and the Pāli canon, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana were much more influential and widespread at the popular level. Even today the epics enjoy unsurpassed popularity throughout the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia. In regard to kingship theories, the views presented in numerous passages appearing



in both epics have a special authority which stems from the fact that they were incorporated into the popular folklore available to all classes of the people. The only other text which had a similar status among the people was the Jātaka tales of Buddhism. The other texts we have examined in the first part of the thesis were in some way or another restricted to a certain class or group.

In the chapter on epic views of kingship, the essential components of the character of an ideal king were discussed. We found that in order to measure up to the criteria of ideal kingship a given king must be a compassionate superman who acts without regard for himself in the interests of his people. On every front of human endeavour, including scholarly and artistic pursuits, the ideal king excels. In the sphere of religion, the ideal king exemplifies the spirit of bhakti or devotion. He is as much devoted to his people as his people are devoted to him. Moreover, he is exceedingly devoted to Viṣṇu, the god who was thought to embody himself in the inner self of the king. The great ideal kings of the epics were not primarily preachers of dharma in the style of Aśoka's kingship. Rather, they were doers of dharma, or, to some extent, incarnations of dharma. Instruction in dharma was thought to be the prerogative of the Brahman class, and the king fulfilled his distinctive function in aiding the Brahmins to carry out their mission by establishing peace, prosperity, and security in the land. The epic authors place the burden of dharma and the religious condition of the masses squarely on the shoulders of the

king. It is in this connection that the Mahābhārata declares that the king is the maker of the age, and posits the related doctrine that, with an ideal king at the helm, it is possible to reverse the degenerating cycle of time and revert back to the pristine purity of the kr̥ta-yuga.

Chronologically, the completion of the epics in their present form occurred at about the time of the advent of the Guptas. The thesis has demonstrated that the two, the epics and the Guptas, were related in many ways besides chronology. We have argued that the conception of kingship and empire which spurred the Guptas onward were drawn from concepts which received their best expression in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana. The agreement between the two is especially apparent when we compare the image the Guptas presented of themselves on their coins and inscriptions with the picture of an ideal king in the epics. In fact, as we have noted, the pervading presence of the ideal prototype in Gupta kingship obscures the characters and personalities of the individual Gupta kings. Their perfection makes them somewhat inhuman, and it supplies evidence that the Guptas were attempting to fulfill the important symbolic function of the king. The adherence to the ideal type in Gupta kingship is integrally related to the Guptas' conscious and deliberate attempt to restore and maintain the traditional culture of India. In order to comprehend the implications of this phenomenon, we should take one of Mircea Eliade's theories into consideration.

What does living mean for a man who belongs to a traditional culture? Above all, it means living in accordance with extrahuman models, in conformity with archetypes. Hence it means living at the heart of the real since...there is nothing truly real except the archetypes. Living in conformity with the archetypes amounted to respecting the "law", since the law was only a primordial hierophany, the revelation in illo tempore of the norms of existence, a disclosure by a divinity or a mythical being.<sup>8</sup>

I believe that Eliade's remarks help to put the ideal king concept into the proper perspective. It was not due to mere flattery by the court bards that the Guptas were likened to Viṣṇu and his avatāras. Rather, the Guptas were proclaiming themselves as real kings, fit to rule the sacred territory of āryāvarta. Anything which did not fit the ideal archetype was left out of the picture for it would detract from the correct image of a king. It is in this regard that one of the authorities on Indian kingship, Dr. J.B. Gokhale, has remarked:

Attributes of the ideal king are the criteria by which the legitimacy of a particular king is judged.<sup>9</sup>

Such a state of affairs is characteristic of a society which is oriented to the distant past. As the yuga doctrine attests, perfection lay in the past, the krta yuga, and the future was expected to get progressively worse as mankind goes through the kali yuga.

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<sup>8</sup> Eliade, M., Cosmos and History - The Myth of the Eternal Return, Harper & Row, New York, 1959, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Gokhale, J.B., "Hindu and Buddhist Political Traditions", op. cit., p. 203.

Yet, as we have seen, time can conceivably reverse itself during the reign of a man who measures up to the exacting criteria of ideal kingship.

We have argued in the course of the thesis that the concept of the ideal king, as expounded in the epics, is the key for understanding Gupta kingship. With this perspective, one can take a critical look at some of the generalisations that have been made about the Guptas in the past. Jaiswal contended in her work on Vaisnavism that the Gupta kings attempted to strengthen their power "by posing as the incarnations of Viṣṇu".<sup>10</sup> This view is misleading because it ignores the background development of Gupta kingship and seems to suggest that the Guptas were power mad monarchs who were pretending to be avatāras in order to strengthen their hand with the people. The facts do not substantiate this interpretation. Nowhere in the Gupta inscriptions is the claim to avatāra status made by or on behalf of the Guptas. It is true that the Guptas were closely allied with Viṣṇu and were frequently compared to Viṣṇu's avatāras such as Varāha, Narasimha, and Kṛṣṇa. But, these comparisons should not lead to the conclusion that the Guptas were posing as incarnations of Viṣṇu. On the other hand, the Guptas do appear to have accepted the epic view that all kings are constituted of a portion (tanu)

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<sup>10</sup>Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 169.

of Viṣṇu. And, they felt that they were possessed of the same incomprehensible spirit (purusa) which is identified with the god Viṣṇu. The tone of these remarks is at variance with Jaiswal's interpretation.

A more conservative view of the Guptas is given by Professor Ghoshal in his History of Indian Political Ideas. He argues that under the influence of foreign and indigenous ideas of divine kingship, the Guptas claimed a superhuman status for themselves.<sup>11</sup> This view is substantiated by our sources, yet it requires more explanation than Ghoshal has granted it in his work. This is understandable since he was mainly concerned with political doctrines per se. This thesis has gone into the question of the Guptas' superhuman status in detail in order to bring forth the doctrine's origins and implications. The Guptas' claim to divine rank was fully based on the laws of the tradition as they were set down in the Dharmaśāstras. Over and over, we find passages in the laws of Manu, Narada, and Viṣṇu which suggest that the king is really a great god in human form. The Guptas drew upon this tradition and embellished it with elaborate titles such as mahārājadhirāja which they borrowed from the Kuṣāṇa kings who preceded them. Their moves were fully condoned, to the best of our knowledge, by the Brahman class, the arbiter of spiritual authority. Thus, the Guptas did not overstretch the bounds of tradition with their "devahood".

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<sup>11</sup>Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 546-7.

We must also note that there was liberal policy regarding human divinity in Gupta times. Brahmins, of course, were also considered to be gods on earth (provided that they are virtuous and knowledgeable in the scriptures). The Kāmandakiya Nītīsāra, a product of the Gupta age, even states that those individuals who "speak sweet words and offer hospitality to all are surely gods under human form".<sup>12</sup> Therefore, one must not make too much out of the Guptas' claim to superhuman status. In the Bhagavadgītā, all people are divided into two very broad and basic categories: the divine (daiva) and the demonic (asura).<sup>13</sup> According to this division, all members of society who act in accordance with dharma are divine and those who act without it are demonic. Thus, it is easy to see why there were many gods in human form in Gupta times. It amounts to an honorific way of viewing worthy people rather than a theological principle. The divinity of the king was a special sort of divinity, however, and the king was supposed to possess superhuman qualities related to his high concentration of tejas or splendour. Gonda's words on this subject are very relevant:

In examining the status of the ancient Indian king from the religious point of view we should never forget that he is called and considered a deva, that is to say, not God, the sole Eternal Lord and Creator of all things, nor his Son or representative, but one of a class of powerful beings, regarded as possessing supernormal fac-

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<sup>12</sup> Kāmandakiya Nītīsāra, trans. Dutt, M.N., op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bhagavadgītā, XVI.

ulties and as controlling a department of nature or activity in the human sphere.<sup>14</sup>

Another generalisation about the Guptas is found in a number of works on India by authors who have not analysed Gupta kingship very carefully. It takes different forms, but the gist of the generalisation runs as follows:

The Brahmin priesthood allowed the Guptas the divine right of kings. The kings were raised to the status of representatives of God on earth with arbitrary and unbounded powers to rule.<sup>15</sup>

This common generalisation is misleading in more than one respect. In the first place, as Professor Ghoshal has proven, the doctrine of the divine right of kings is not applicable to Indian kingship at any period of its development.<sup>16</sup> It is a term which fits certain periods of European history, but it loses its significance when applied to the Guptas. As Ghoshal argues:

...the doctrine of the king's accountability to God alone is completely alien to our ancient thinkers. On the contrary the authoritative Smritis conceive the king to be subject to the law of his order and the rules of the State law governing his rights and duties in respect of his subjects while they invoke the inexorable law of karma for keeping him true to his obligations.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>15</sup>Kotturan, G., Ahimsā: Gautama to Gandhi, Sterling Publishers Ltd., New Delhi, 1973, p. 96.

<sup>16</sup>Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 541.

<sup>17</sup>Loc. cit.

The second point of our misleading generalisation concerning the "arbitrary and unbounded powers to rule" of the Guptas is aptly refuted by the second part of Ghoshal's observation quoted above. The facts indicate that the Guptas were consciously placing themselves within the bounds of tradition (dharma) which they felt they were restoring in India. There is nothing in our source material which indicates that the Guptas were arbitrary or capricious in the application of their power. Therefore, one must conclude that generalisations like the one considered above stem from reading western political thought and history into the Indian tradition.

One of the central questions about Gupta kingship concerns the relationship between their understanding of kingship and that of the pre-Gupta traditions. This question entails an assessment of the conservative and innovative elements in Gupta kingship. On the surface, the Guptas were very conservative monarchs. They followed "the path of the sacred hymns", the Vedas, and performed ancient royal sacrifices such as the aśvamedha. Moreover, they were scrupulous in fulfilling the two most important duties of an ancient Indian king, i.e., protection of the people and support of the Brahmins. At the same time, we have noted that the duties and responsibilities of a king had expanded since the time of the Vedas. The Guptas were emperors governing a mammoth kingdom. The kings spoken of in the Vedas, on the other hand, governed comparatively small states. Along with this change in the sheer size of the kingdom, there were many other alternations



and additions in the respective conceptions of kingship. Indra, the mighty divine warrior of the Vedas, had been gradually superceded by Visnu, the compassionate dharma-oriented emperor, as the divine prototype for the king. In addition, Visnu's consort Sri Laksmi assumed an active role in regard to kingship on earth. Figuratively, she is said to select and marry the future king thereby assuring his success. In contrast, Indra's consort, Indrānī, played a very minor role in regard to kingship.

From the point of view of religious history, we can see a number of changes in the conception of kingship when we compare the Vedic with the Gupta sources. In the first place, we find that sacrifice is less important in Gupta kingship. This is due in part to the fact that royal divinity was ascribed in Gupta times and not acquired through massive sacrifices as in the earlier period. We also find that there was an increasing emphasis put on compassion and ahimsā in Gupta kingship. Vedic sacrifices were still performed in the Gupta empire, especially in the brahmadeya villages. But, the Guptas themselves seem to have been affected by the new interpretation of sacrifice given in the Bhagavadgītā, self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. This interpretation of sacrifice is an important element in the ideal king's character, for he is always ready to lay down his life for a just cause.

The king in Gupta times played an essential role in the religious life of the country. The epics, perhaps influenced by

Buddhism, placed the responsibility for the maintenance of dharma on the shoulders of the king. The Guptas fulfilled this duty not by preaching to the people about dharma as Asoka had done but by their liberal patronage of the religious institutions of their time. Thus, we find the Guptas at the forefront of the massive program of temple construction which occurred in the Gupta age. This type of religious responsibility is not evident in the early vedic understanding of kingship. Temples were not a part of the religious life of the people in those days.

The changes in the conception of kingship are related to a re-interpretation of the nature and purpose of the state which we have found in the epics. Rāma taught that a kingdom (rājya) must be established upon truth and that the true behavior of kings comprises truth and compassion.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the state and the king who rules and symbolizes it are intrinsically related to righteousness in the epics:

He is called rājan (king) in whom righteousness (dharma) dominates (lit. "shines"),<sup>19</sup>

The kingdom itself was viewed as a manifestation of dharma, originally established by Viṣṇu for the physical and spiritual betterment of mankind. As Dr. Jauhari correctly observes:

<sup>18</sup> Rāmāyana, II, 118, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Mhb., XII, 90, 14.

The Mahābhārata regards obedience to the state as obligatory on all, because the most important function of the state is to establish and maintain dharma....it was believed that in obeying the state the individual was, really speaking, obeying dharma.<sup>20</sup>

Only with this background in mind is it possible to understand the Guptas' extensive use of Vaiṣṇava religious symbols on their coins, edicts, and inscriptions.

In sum, the concept of the ideal king leads one to another ideal, the ideal state known as rāmarājya. The *raison d'être* of the Rāma-type king is the establishment and maintenance of rāmarājya, a condition of harmony between man and his neighbors and man and nature. This conception of a harmonious state may well be compared to a gigantic play enacted on the broad stage of āryāvarta. In this "play" the king is the hero and central character, but everyone down to the humble villager has a part to play. There are numerous "props" employed in the "play" and the Mahābhārata and other texts enumerate the essentials.<sup>21</sup> This analogy should not be pressed too far, but it is a helpful device for conceptualizing this view of kingship.

The concept of rāmarājya has a unique relationship with

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<sup>20</sup> Jauhari, M., Politics and Ethics in Ancient India - A Study Based on the Mahābhārata, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, Varanasi, 1968, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mhb., XII, 67.

time. As we have seen, the ideal state involved a return to the past, a revolution in the most basic sense of the word. For the Guptas and their successors, the reenactment of the kṛta yuga was an ever-present ideal. Not all dynasties were powerful enough to found a new era as the Guptas had done, but the search for renewal of time was prevalent in all Hindu kingdoms. One is reminded by the poetry of Kālidāsa that this doctrine of kingship entails a longing for pristine purity:

Even the qualities of the five (primary) elements acquired a (greater) excellence during the regime of the new king; (now) everything became, as it were, new.<sup>22</sup>

Under an ideal king, it would appear that the people lived in the eternal present, free from the terror of degenerating time cycles. The world could theoretically be re-created, i.e. renewed, by a Rāma-type king. Or, on the other hand, an unrighteous king could theoretically destroy the world and plunge it deeper into the kali yuga. This idea is concisely stated in the Mahābhārata as follows:

The king who followed dharma was called a creator and he who neglected it was deemed to be a destructor.<sup>23</sup>

When all these factors are taken into consideration, the

<sup>22</sup> Raghuvamśa, IV, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Mhb., XII, 91, 9.

statement of Drekmeier's that India has never known an image of utopia, an earthly kingdom of God, because it was resigned to an imperfect world <sup>24</sup> seems quite invalid and misleading. Rāmarājya is certainly a utopian concept for it entails a belief in the perfectability of the world. Ancient Indian thinkers were aware of the imperfections of the kali yuga, but our study has indicated that they were not "resigned" to this belief. On the contrary, they sought to abolish the imperfections of the world and return enmasse to the safer world of the krta yuga. In order to accomplish this seemingly impossible task, they put all their hope on the king who was they felt the maker of the age.

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<sup>24</sup> Drekmeier, op. cit., p. 300.

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