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After the downfall of the Kushanas in the north and the Satavahanas in the south, three political powers emerged in central and eastern part of northern India. In the middle of the third century A.D. the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh saw the rise of the Vakatakas. In the western part of Madhyadesha, Bharashiva nagas had established themselves with their kingdom in Padmavati i.e., Padmapawaya of Madhya Pradesh and towards the close of the century the Varanasi region of eastern Uttar Pradesh came under the rule of the Guptas. Bharashivas merged their kingdom with the Vakatakas, who later shifted their seat of power to Vidarbha region and established their supremacy in Deccan. The Guptas then built one of the largest empire in the history of Ancient India which included the whole of India north of Vindhyas.

Our entire information for the Gupta empire (including its feudatories) and the Vakataka kingdom comes from inscriptions which included copper plate grants or land grant charters, cave inscriptions, prasastis or eulogies inscribed on stone and stone pillars and various seal inscriptions. Their number has been kept on increasing with fresh discoveries and publications. The Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum editions of Gupta inscriptions edited by J.F. Fleet and then by D.R.
Bhadarkar, in successive versions and of Vakataka inscriptions edited by V.V. Marashi are supplemented in the present study by inscriptions published in *Epigraphia Indica* and other journals such as *Indian Antiquary, Indian Historical Quarterly, Journal of Epigraphical Society of India* etc. as well as by volumes edited by K.V. Ramesh, S.P. Tewari and Ajay Mitra Shastri. These new inscriptions not only constitute a large body of evidence making it possible to take up afresh the question of the relationship between the Gupta emperors and their feudatories but also reveal some new informations about political, administrative and economic conditions of the Gupta as well as the Vakataka empires.

The inscriptions particularly copper plate grants of the Guptas and their feudatories are all dated in the Gupta era while that of the Vakatakas are dated in the regnal year of the reigning monarch. They provide us the description of the donors, donees, the list of officers, their designations as well as throw light on the nature of state organisation and administration. Thus, the inscriptions provide information about the political and administrative structure of the Guptas and Vakatakas and the subordinate dynasties of the Gupta realm.

After scanning this vast treasure of information it is found that the Guptas who emerged later than the Vakatakas rose as an independent power in the region around Varanasi under *Maharaja* Srigupta (A.D.
They grew powerful in the period of Chandragupta I and developed into a great imperial power by the mighty emperors Samudragupta and his son Chandragupta II in whose period Gupta empire had control over the whole Aryavarta region extended from the Himalaya in the north upto Narmada in the south and from Arabian sea in the west upto Bay of Bengal in the east and had great influence over Dakshinapath i.e., South India. Political strategies including military conquest and diplomatic alliances of the Gupta rulers mainly contributed in extending Gupta territories. Epigraphical evidences suggest that Gupta empire was largely formed by the states administered by subordinate or tributary rulers, often referred to in the modern writings as feudatories. They were called Maharajas and Mahasamantas, payed tributes to their overlord and enjoyed a large extent of autonomy in their respective kingdoms which were formally included in the Gupta empire.

This system of government though worked successfully in the early days of the Gupta empire when central government was effective enough to control and prevent the disruptive tendencies of the feudatories but it ultimately led to the decentralization and disintegration of the empire. Another important development of this period was the growing practice of making grants of land and villages to individuals and religious institutions for religious purpose with certain privileges.
including revenue and administrative rights. This strengthened the position of donees and in course of time led to a new social formation which has been described as feudal.

After a critical assessment of the evidences provided by the literary and epigraphical sources belonging to the Vakatakas, it is established in the present study that the Vakatakas began their rule somewhere in the Vindhya region under their founder member viz. Vindhyasakti I. Their early capital seems to have been in the town of Kanchanaka which is identified with Nachna-ki-Talai in the Panna district of the Bundelkhand division of Madhya Pradesh. They moved southwards to Vidarbha under Pravarasena I and divided into two branches after him known as Nandivardhana - Pravarapura branch or main branch and Vatsagulma branch after their respective capitals. Whatever evidences provided by the Vakataka inscriptions indicate that Vakataka kings (of both the branches) administered their kingdoms with more authority. There were feudatories but their number was limited and they were less powerful than the Gupta feudatories. From the Vakataka sources it appears that Vakataka kingdom was more centralized.

The importance of land grant charters as a source for the study of economic history is immense. These charters contain references to the number of taxes, from which the donated villages were exempted which
give us an idea of the fiscal rights of the Gupta and Vakataka states. In the land grant charters the donated land or village is very often specified by the boundary marks like the wells, tanks and certain other physical features. The name of the village and the description of its physical situation may indicate whether it lies in virgin, semi-virgin, or settled area. In the present study major questions regarding ownership of land, land tenure and land survey are also investigated.

While it is true that the reliable stock of information is taken from the inscriptions, the literary sources of the period are also investigated to correlate this information. The literary sources include the legal texts belonging to fourth to sixth century A.D. such as the law books of Brihaspati, Narada and Kamandaka and of the earlier period like Arthashastra, Manusmriti and Vishnu Smriti. Hindu religious texts i.e. Puranas are also useful. The Puranic account given in the dynasties of the Kali Age edited by F.E. Pargitar is used. Ceylonese Buddhist Chronical viz. Mahavamsa is investigated to find out Guptas’ relations with Ceylon. In the category of secular literature of the period under study the most important are the works of Kalidasa. His Raghuvamsa is used to find out information about various aspects of the Gupta polity. The accounts of the foreign travellers who came to India during the period under study have not been overlooked. The most important
among them are those left by Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang. Their observations regarding the administration of contemporary period are important and is analysed in the light of information we get from the inscriptions of the Gupta period.