

# The Vakataka Empire

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The Vakataka Empire was a dynasty from the Indian subcontinent that originated from the Deccan in the mid-3rd century CE. Their state is believed to have extended from the southern edges of Malwa and Gujarat in the north to the Tungabhadra River in the south as well as from the Arabian Sea in the west to the edges of Chhattisgarh in the east. They were the most important successors of the Satavahanas in the Deccan and contemporaneous with the Guptas in northern India.

## *Origins*

- The Vakatakas were Brahmins.
- Their origins are not clear with some claiming they are a northern family while others claim they originated in southern India.
- They have Sanskrit and Prakrit inscriptions which are similar to those belonging to the southern Pallavas.
- Also, no records of the Vakatakas have been found north of the Narmada. They are also mentioned in the Puranas.

## *Extent*

The Vakataka kingdom extended from the southern extremities of Malwa and Gujarat in the north to the Tungabhadra River in the south, and from the Arabian Sea in the west to the edges of Chhattisgarh in the east.

## *Rulers*

### **Vindhyashakti (Reign: 250 – 270 CE)**

- Founder of the dynasty.
- Probably ruled from Purika.
- Performed a number of Vedic sacrifices and revived Brahmanical rituals.
- He is described as a Dvija on the Ajanta inscriptions of the time of Harisena and is praised for his military accomplishments.

### **Pravarasena I (Reign: 270 – 330 AD)**

- Son and successor of Vindhyashakti.
- His other titles include Samrat, Dharmamaharaja and Haritiputra.

- His empire included a good portion of northern India and the Deccan.
- He conducted Vedic rituals like Ashwamedha, Vajapeya, etc.
- The founder of the real power and greatness of the Vakatakas. He enlarged his empire southwards into Vidarbha and adjoining areas of the Deccan, with his capital at Kanchanaka (modern Nachna).
- His son Gautamiputra married the daughter of the Naga king Bhavanaga, which formed an important political alliance.
- With the help of matrimonial alliances and military power, he extended his empire from Bundelkhand in the north to Hyderabad in the south. To celebrate his victories, he performed an asvamedha and a vajapeya sacrifice. He adopted the title “Samrat” while all other Vakataka kings took the title of “Maharaja”.
- He conducted wars with the Nagas.
- He had four sons as per the Puranas and it is possible that the empire split up among his sons.
- His son Gautamiputra died before him and his grandson (son of Gautamiputra) Rudrasena I succeeded him to the throne and ruled from Nandivardhana. Sarvasena, another son of Pravarasena, ruled independently from Vatsagulma.
- After his death, there were two divisions of the Vakatakas.
  - i. Pravarapura-Nandivardhana Branch [Nandivardhana – modern Nagpur]
  - ii. Vatsagulma Branch [Modern Washim, Akola district, Maharashtra]

### ***Pravarapura-Nandivardhana Branch***

This branch ruled over Pravarapura (in present Wardha, Maharashtra), Mansar and Nandivardhan in the present Nagpur district.

#### **Rudrasena I (Reign: 340 – 365 CE)**

- Grandson of Pravarasena I.
- Founder of the Nandivardhana branch of the Vakataka kingdom.
- He was a worshipper of Lord Mahabhairava, the fierce form of Shiva.

#### **Prithvisena I (c. 365 – 390 CE)**

- In Vakataka inscriptions, he was compared to the epic hero Yudhishtira due to his comparable qualities of truthfulness, compassion and humility.
- Padmapura was an important administrative centre during his reign.
- The political alliance with Chandragupta II was an important feature of his reign and together they defeated the Shaka Satraps of Malwa and Kathiawar.
- Guptas and Vakatakas strengthened their bond by a marriage alliance between Rudrasena II (Prithvisena’s son) and Prabhavatigupta (daughter of Chandragupta II).

- Followed Shaivism like his father.

### **Rudrasena II (Reign: 390 – 395 CE)**

- Son of Prithvisena I.
- Married Prabhavatigupta, daughter of Chandragupta II.
- He ruled for only five years leaving behind his three sons – Divakarasena, Damodarasena and Pravarasena. His wife Prabhavatigupta ruled as the regent until 410 CE. The seal of Prabhavatigupta's Maregaon plates describes her as the 'mother of two kings' because her elder son Divakarasena did not live long enough to ascend the throne but both her younger sons did rule.

### **Pravarasena II (Reign: 395 – 440 CE)**

- Was named Damodarasena.
- Second son of Rudrasena II.
- He became the king after his elder brother Divakarasena died.
- A dozen copper plate grants of his were discovered in different parts of Vidarbha. The largest number of Vakataka inscriptions belong to his reign.
- Founded a new capital at Pravara-pura (Paunar in the present-day Wardha district).
- He entered into a matrimonial alliance with the contemporary Kadambas (near Mysore).
- Composed Setubandha/Ravanavaha, a Prakrit (Maharashtri Prakrit) kavya glorifying Rama. It is about Rama's journey to Lanka and his victory over Ravana.
- He was a devotee of Shiva.

### **Narendrasena (c. 440 – 460 CE)**

- He was married to Ajihata Bhattarika, the daughter of Kakutsavarman of the Kadamba dynasty.
- He had to face stiff opposition from Nalas.

### **Prithvisena II (c. 460 – 480 CE)**

- Last known ruler of the Nandivardhana branch of the Vakataka dynasty.
- His inscriptions refer to his having twice rescued the sunken fortunes of Vakatakas.
- He had to face the invasion of Harisena of the Vatsagulma line thrice, and the invasion of Bhavadottavarman of the Nala dynasty. It appears that he had to fight with the Traikutaka king, Dahrasena of southern Gujarat as well.

- After his death, it is presumed that Harisena of the Vatsagulma branch of the Vakatakas conquered his successors and united the Nandivardhana branch with his own.

### *Vatsagulma Branch*

This branch ruled over the territory between the Sahyadri Range and the Godavari River with its capital at Vatsagulma (present Washim, Maharashtra). Its founder was Sarvasena, the son of Pravarasena I .

#### **Sarvasena (Reign: 330 – 355 CE)**

- Son of Pravarasena I.
- A renowned Prakrit poet, the author of Harivijaya. Some of his verses were incorporated into the Gathasattasai.
- He adopted the title “Dharma-Maharaja”.

#### **Vindiyashakti II/Vindhyaasena (c. 355 – 400 CE)**

- His kingdom included the Marathwada region (southern part of Vidarbha), the northern part of Hyderabad and some other adjoining territories. He ruled for about four decades.
- It appears that he had defeated the Kadambas of Banavasi who ruled over Kuntala (North Karnataka).
- His son and successor Pravarasena II ruled for about fifteen years. Pravarasena II was succeeded by Devasena, who was a pleasure-seeking ruler but was lucky enough to have a capable minister in his kingdom – Hasthibhoja. His successor was the ablest and great ruler of the Vatsagulma branch.

#### **Harisena (Reign: 475 – 500 AD)**

- Fifth-generation descendent of Sarvasena.
- Patronised Buddhist art and architecture.
- Many of the Buddhist caves, Viharas and Chaityas at Ajanta were executed under his reign. Ajanta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1983.
- The later caves at Ajanta show the high perfection and sophistication in art achieved under the Vakataka kings particularly Harisena.
- He united the two Vakataka branches and conquered Kuntala, Avanti, Kosala, Kalinga, Konkan and Andhra. His empire extended from Malwa in the north to southern Maharashtra in the south and from the Bay of Bengal in the east to the Arabian Sea in the west.

- Harisena is described as “powerful, truthful and bountiful, glorious, lofty and a penetrating critic of ethical and economic compendia” by Dandin, a poet of the 6th century CE.
- The Thalner copper plates belong to his reign and many of the Ajanta caves were executed during his reign.
- In one of his inscriptions, Varahadeva is mentioned as his minister.
- After his death, he was probably succeeded by a few rulers but not much is known about the end of the dynasty.