

# Satavahanas: Deccan's First Empire Builders (100 BCE – 3rd CE)

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In the north-western Deccan on the ruins of the Mauryan empire arose the kingdom of the Satavahanas in the first century B.C., with its centre at Pratishtana (modern Paithan in Maharashtra).

The Puranas speak only of the Andhra rule and not of the Satavahana rule. On the other hand the name Andhra does not occur in the Satavahana inscriptions. There is a lot of controversy regarding the original home of the Satavahanas.

The kings represented in epigraphic records are mentioned in the Puranas as Andhras, Andhra – bhriyah and Andhrajatiyah. The Aitareya Brahmana speaks of them as the degenerate sons of Visvamitra. Pliny the Elder refers to the Andhras as a powerful race which supplied the king with an army of 1, 00,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry and 1,000 elephants.

The Satavahanas were also called/the Andhra dynasty, which has led to the assumption that they originated in the Andhra region, the delta of the Krishna and Godavari rivers on the east coast, from where they moved westwards up the Godavari river, finally establishing their power in the west during the general political confusion on the breaking up of the Mauryan empire.

A contrary opinion has also been put forward that the family originated in the west and extended its control to the east coast, finally giving its name, Andhra, to this region. Since the earliest inscriptions of the Satavahanas are found in the Western Deccan, the later view may be correct.

The Andhras held a position of importance as early as the Mauryan period, since they are specifically mentioned by Asoka amongst the tribal people in his empire.

## ***Early Satavahanas:***

The founder of the Satavahana dynasty was Simuka. He and his successors established their authority from the mouth of the Krishna to the entire Deccan plateau. According to the Puranas, the Satavahana king killed the last Kanva ruler of Magadha and presumably took possession of his kingdom.

The earliest of the Satavahana kings to receive wide recognition was Satakarni I, and this was due to his policy of military expansion in all directions. He is the Lord of the west who defied Kharavela of Kalinga and against whom the latter campaigned. His conquests took him north of the Narmada into eastern Malva, which at the time was being threatened by the Shakas and the Greeks.

Satakarni I gained control of the region of Sanchi, and an inscription there refers to him as Rajan Shri Satakarni. His next move was in the southerly direction and on conquering the Godavari valley he felt entitled to call himself Lord of the Southern Regions' (Dakshina – pathapati).

The description of Satakarni I as ('Dakshina -pathapati) in the Nanaghat inscription of Nayanika proves that the Satavahana dominion was not confined to western Deccan alone, but included other areas of the Deccan and beyond Satakarni I performed two Asvamedha sacrifices and one Rajasuya sacrifice.

### ***Later Satavahanas:***

After the reign of Satakarni I, the Satavahanas were driven out of the western Deccan by the Shakas of the Kshaharata clan. Coins and inscriptions of the Shaka Chief Nahapana have been found around Nasik, indicating the Shaka dominance in the area towards the close of the first century A.D. or the beginning of the second.

But it must have been soon after this that the Satavahanas regained their western possessions, for the coins of Nahapana are often found over-struck by the name Gautamiputra Satakarni, the king who was responsible for re-establishing Satavahana power in this region by driving out the Shakas.

Gautamiputra Satakarni (A.D. 106 -130) is said to have destroyed the power of the Shakas and the pride of the Kshatriyas, promoted the interests of the twice-born and stopped the mixing of the four varnas. His achievements are recorded in glowing terms in the Nasik prasasti by his mother Gautami Balasri.

He ruled over a wide area extending from the Krishna in the south to Malwa and Saurashtra in the north and from Berar in the east to the Konkan in the west. To the Buddhists he made munificent donations. His patronage to Brahmanism is revealed by the epithet 'Ekabrahmana'.

Women were honoured. They were given higher education and they took part in religious functions. Some of the rulers even added their mother's name to their own name, such as Gautamiputra, Vashishthiputra, Pulumavi, Kaushakiputra etc.

This practice itself reveals that the status of women was much high. Sometimes, women assumed guardianship of their minor sons and acted as their regents. They also took part in the Ashvamedhas. The Satavahanas were Brahmanas.

Therefore, Brahmanism made rapid strides under their rule. The Brahmanas were accorded the highest place. Effort was also made to revise the Varna system. In their bid to exalt Brahmanism the Smritis declared that a ten years old Brahman would be more revered than a 100 years old Kshatriya.

Mixed marriages were considered obnoxious though there are some instances of such marriages. Vashishthiputra Pulumavi himself married the daughter of the Saka ruler Rudradaman thus giving respectability to such marriages. In this period, inter marriages among the Hindus and foreign tribes of the Sakas, the Parthians and the Greeks were freely consummated so that these foreigners were absorbed forever in the Hindu social order.

***Economic Condition:***

Agriculture and trade were prosperous. Life of the common man was happy as he was well-provided with all facilities of life. They were economically well-off. They inherited many traits of the material culture of the Mauryas and made their life better and well off. There was a free fusion of local elements and northern ingredients under them.

They learnt the use of coins, burnt bricks and ring wells from the Mauryas and added much to the advancement of their material life. Under the Satavahanas, agriculture was prosperous and the village's economy was developed. Rice was cultivated in the territory between the Krishna and Godavari rivers. Cotton was also produced. The peasants used implements made of iron which were extensively used particularly in Carnatic. There were also wells for irrigation.

Encouragement was given to trade and industry. The traders and those engaged in other professions had their own guilds or 'sanghas'. Coin dealers, potters, oil pressers and metal workers had their own guilds. These guilds looked after the collective interests of their trade and worked for their common uplift. These guilds were recognized by the Government and worked as bankers also.

Both internal and external to trade and industry. The external or foreign trade was carried through the famous ports of Supara, Broach and Kalyan. India and trade relations with countries like Arabia, Egypt and Rome. In the far eastern countries, Indian traders established their own settlements and preach Indian culture.

They referred to these countries as 'Swargabhoomi' or paradise. India exported cotton, textiles, spices etc. India imported wine, glass and items of luxury. The inland trade was also prosperous. Travel between the north and south of India were much easy as the roads and transport were better.

Several towns sprang up in Maharashtra during this period. Paithan, Nasik and Junar were big markets and centers of trade. In the south-east Vijaypur and Narsela were well-known trade centers. There were guilds of traders as well and they carried trade in groups. To encourage trade, the Satavahana kings struck numerous coins of gold, silver, copper and bronze.

### ***Satavahana Administration:***

The Satavahana coins, inscriptions and literature are the rich source of our knowledge about their administrative system. In this period the South was ruled over by the monarchies. King was the highest official of the Government and his office was hereditary.

They did not assume high sounding titles. Similarly, the Satavahana rulers did not believe in divine rights of a king and they carried administration in accordance with the directives of the Dharma Shastras and the social customs. The king himself led his armies in the battle-field and was commander-in-chief of his forces.

There was also a council of ministers to aid and advise him for carrying out the administration properly. The king was the head of the Government as well as the protector to his people. The Satavahana kings regarded their subjects as their own children and always looked after their welfare.

The Satavahana Empire was very vast. Their administrative system was feudal. They had divided their empire among a number of feudal chiefs who managed the land revenue system and looked after the administration.

There were three grades of feudatories – the 'Raja', the 'Mahabhoja' and the 'Maharathi or 'Senapati'. The 'Raja' belonged to the highest grade. He had the right to impose taxes and to

strike coins. The kingdom was divided into provinces and 'Janapadas' for administrative efficiency.

The highest official in a province was 'Amatya' or minister. His office was not hereditary. Men of proven ability were appointed to this office. Each unit had several villages. A village was administered by a 'Gramika'. There were several officials to help the king. Out of them, the most important were 'Senapati', 'Mahabhoja', 'Koshadhyaksha', 'Rajadhoof', 'Amatya' etc.

There was also a special official called 'Uparakshita' who was charged with the duty of building caves etc. for the monks. The 'bhikshus' (monks) and Brahmanas were held in high esteem and they too observed and preached high standards of conduct. They were beyond the ordinary laws of the Government.

In this period, the local administration had its own importance. There were separate organizations to look after the administration of the towns and the villages. The towns were administered by a body called the 'Nagarsabha' while in villages there were 'Gram Sabhas'. These organizations carried their functions independently without any interference.

The military administration of the Satavahanas was also quite efficient. Their army consisted of foot soldiers, cavalry and elephants. Foot soldiers or infantry was the backbone of the army and they formed the vanguard and were flanked on either side by horses and elephants. The soldiers used swords, spears, axes and armours as weapons of war.

It was by dint of efficient military administration that the Satavahanas succeeded in expanding their empires. They kept a regiment posted in each village for maintaining peace and order. They were maintained at the expense of the rural inhabitants.

### ***Religious Condition:***

During the Satavahana period, both Hinduism and Buddhism spread rapidly. The Satavahana rulers were the followers of Brahmanism. They performed Aswamedha Yajnas and gave donations to Brahmanas. Indra, Surya (The Sun God), Chandra, (the Moon God), Vasudeva, Krishna, Pasupati and Gauri etc. were various Gods and Goddesses worshipped by the people. Shaivism and Vaishnavism were most popular forms of Hinduism. Beautiful temples were built. The Brahmins occupied the highest position in the society.

The Satavahana kings were Brahmanas but they showed tolerance towards other faiths such as Buddhism as well. They gave similar donations to Buddhism as they did for the Hinduism.

Consequently, Buddhism too spread in this period. At many places, the Buddhist caves, chaityas and stupas were built.

***Literature:***

The Satavahana rulers were lovers of literature. Under their patronage, great progress was made in the field of literature. Most of the Satavahana rulers were themselves learned and had special interest in literature. In this period, the Prakrit language and literature developed significantly.

They extended patronage to the Prakrit language and wrote most of their inscriptions in that language. The Satvahana King Hala was a poet of high order. He composed 'Gatha Saptasatf in Prakrti.

It has 700 shloakas. He also patronized several scholars who lived in his court. Gunadhya, the great scholar who wrote 'Brihat Katha' lived in his court. Another scholar Sarva Varman wrote a treatise on the Sanskrit Grammar.

***Architecture:***

Marked progress was made in the field of architecture as well. The Satvahana rulers took interest in building caves, viharas or monasteries, chaityas or large halls with a number of columns and stupas.

Most of the rock caves in the Deccan were cut during this period. These caves were big and beautiful. The caves, monasteries, chaityas and stupas of Orissa, Nasik, Karle and Bhuj are fine specimen of contemporary architecture and decoration.

Chaitya was a large hall with a number of columns. The Vihara had a central Hall. One could enter this hall by a doorway from a varandah in front. The Chaitya of Karle was most famous. It is 40 metres long, 15 metres wide and 15 metres high. It has rows of 15 columns on each side.

Each of these columns is built on a stair like square plinth. Each pillar has a capital figure of an elephant, a horse or a rider on the top. The roof-tops are also decorated with elegant carvings. The viharas were meant as places of residence for the monks. At Nasik, there are three viharas carrying the inscriptions of Gautmiputra and Nahapana.

The most famous of these monuments are the stupas. Among them the Amravati Stupa and the Nagarjunakonda Stupa are most famous. The stupa was a large round structure built over some relic of the Buddha.

The Amravati Stupa measures 162 metres across the base and its height is 100 feet. Both these stupas are full of sculptures. The Nagarjunakonda town contains not only the Buddhist monuments but also some ancient Hindu brick temples.

Many sculptures were made during this period. Most of the sculptures of this period depict scenes from the life of the Buddha. At Amravati, there is a beautiful scene showing Buddha's feet being worshipped. The scene, showing Buddha preaching at Nagarjunakonda, is pervaded with serenity and calm.

### *Achievements*

#### **The Satavahana Rulers and their Conquests:**

There were about 19 Satavahana rulers of whom the most important were Simuka who conquered Magadha and Krishna who occupied Nasik. Sri Satakarni conquered Berar and Madhya Pradesh. Little is known about their successors for about a century except Hala the 17th ruler of this dynasty.

Shri Gautamiputra Satakarni conquered Malwa, Kathiawar, Gujarat and part of the Rajputana. Shri Pulumavi had perpetual conflict with Rudradaman. The last king was Yagya Sri Satakarni who was a strong ruler. He waged wars to recover the territories conquered previously by the Saka rulers.

#### **Political Condition and Administration:**

The system of administration was monarchical. The king himself was the commander of his force. He sought advice from his council of ministers to carry out his administration efficiently. The administration was feudal. The whole kingdom was divided into provinces, districts and villages.

The king was always prepared to take steps for the welfare of his subjects. The main sources of income were land tax, salt tax, property tax, justice-cess and income from import and export trade. The military administration was efficient. The army which consisted of infantry or foot soldiers, cavalry or horses and elephants were well-equipped.

#### **Literary Progress:**

The Satavahana kings were lovers of literature. They also patronized learning. The Prakrit language prospered well during this period. Hala wrote 'Gatha – Saptasati, Gunadhya wrote 'Brihat Katha' and Sarva Varman wrote a treatise on the Sanskrit Grammar.

**Progress in the Field of Architecture:**

Under the Satavahanas great progress was made in the field of architecture as well.

**Progress in the Field of Sculpture:**

Many statues and images were also made during this period. Most of the images depict scenes from the life of the Buddha.

The scene depicting Buddha's feet being worshipped is particularly a unique sculpture at the Amravati Stupa while at Nagarjunakonda the sculpture, depicting the Buddha giving a sermon, cast a spell of serenity and calm.