PREFACE

The third volume of A Comprehensive History of India covers the period, roughly speaking, from A.D. 300 to A.D. 985. It has been, for the sake of convenience, split into two parts: the first part deals with the political history and political organization (Chapters I-XXVII), while the second with social, economic, religious and cultural conditions as well as coinage (Chapters XXVIII-XXXV).

The present volume dwells on a very significant period of ancient Indian history. It witnessed the culmination of the Indian genius on the one hand and the beginning of its decline on the other. The Imperial Guptas with whom the volume opens ably countered the centrifugal forces in Northern India and the kingdom established by Chandragupta I, one of the early members of the family, was shortly converted by his son, Samudra-gupta, into an empire. The Gupta empire, reared up by a succession of competent rulers, gave North India not only political stability and imperial peace, but also set an exemplary standard in all departments of life and culture. Indeed, the advent of the Guptas on the political stage ushered in an epoch which has rightly been called the ‘Golden Age’ or the ‘Classical Period’ of Indian history, which is still remembered for the literary colossus Kālidāsa, eminent scientists of the stature of Āryabhaṭa and Varāhamihira, metallurgical wonder such as the Iron Pillar at Mehrauli, splendid sculptures of the Sarnath school and the remarkable paintings of Ajanta. It was an age which witnessed brisk commercial and colonial and cultural activities abroad, the final development of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, efflorescence of Sanskrit literature, definite shaping of the extensive Puranic literature, and the culmination of an age-long religious movement in what goes by the name of Hinduism. In spite of the fact that the society of the time had conceivably its tensions, stresses and ferments, India during the Gupta period achieved a total vision of life and gave an able expression to it. Admittedly the Gupta period left a deep and wide impress upon the posterity and in ways more than one the Indians of the succeeding ages built on the same heritage.

With the passing of the Imperial Guptas around A.D. 550 begins the second chronological sector of the period which extends
to A.D. 985. Generally designated as the ‘Early Medieval Period’, it was an age of regionalism. Indians lost their sense of national being and the totality of vision of life. The spirit of the jānapada autonomy reared its head once more and barring the kingdoms or empires (some of which at times were quite extensive), such as the ones set up by the Pālas, Pratihāras, Rāśṭrákūtas, Western Chālukyas, Pallavas and Cholas, India broke up into congeries of regional states. And even major empires such as those of the Pālas, Pratihāras, Pallavas and Cholas, were but magnified kingdoms and seldom embodied the pan-Indian ideal of the Maurya and the Gupta periods. Regionalism articulated itself in other spheres of life and activities of the country. The rise of regional states implying the lack of a central authority was accompanied by a new politico-economic system called feudalism which was becoming preponderant from the seventh century onwards. The new institution, based on a hierarchy from the king to the land-bound peasant, each owing allegiance to his next higher master, was expressive of an essentially local outlook. And this localism was further spelt out when the number of intermediaries increased. The regional factor also manifested itself in the realms of religion and culture. The rise of several religious subsects and the appearance of the Nāgara and Drāvīḍa temple styles are instances in point. What is more, the period witnessed the emergence of regional languages, script and art styles, which later collectively formed the tapestry of the Indian culture.

The medieval period in Indian history is often equated with political instability, social insecurity and cultural degeneration. Such an equation is more apparent than real. The early medieval period of our history, like the later medieval, in spite of some dismaying features, has silver linings too. Compared to the Gupta period it was certainly an age of decline and decadence. It was an age of political fragmentation and cultural insularity. It was not an epoch of Kālidāsa and Āryabhaṭa. Yet the contributions of Bāṇa and Rājaśekhara, Saṅkarāchāryya and Vāchāspati-miśra, Udbhaṭa and Anandavardhana, Medhātithi and Mādhavakara, and several academics of the universities of Nālandā, Vikramāśīlā and Somapura, to our literature and intellectual life can hardly be over-emphasized. Similarly, the splendid monuments and reliefs of Bāḏāmi, Ellora, Elephanta and Mahābalipuram, the early architectural examples and sculptures of Bhuvanesvara and Khajurāho, and the paintings of Bittanavanasaal speak a plastic language which is far from insipid and inane.

The early medieval period is significant for another reason. It was an age which brought the trends and tendencies of the Gupta period
to fulfilment on the one hand and opened the fresh possibilities for the future in different areas of our life and culture on the other. For example, it represented the finality of the stūpa and cave architecture of the previous period and inaugurated the era of the Nāgara and Drāviḍa temple styles, the archetypes of which were on view in the Gupta monuments. Feudalism, the genesis of which was seen in the late Gupta period, saw a widespread development during this period and later. The cult-icons of this period presented a tale of ideas and ideations and their fascinating interplay, not heard of in previous ages. Similarly, the new powers who appeared following the fall of the Pratihāras and later came to be collectively known as the Rajputs played not an inconsiderable role in our life and culture. Moreover, the Muslims who appeared on the political scene during this period, specifically around A.D. 1000 under the leadership of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, subsequently became a potent factor in Indian history and culture, and indeed they imparted a new vitality to the Indian life. Viewed as a whole, therefore, the early medieval period of India is not that bleak and decadent as is generally believed. On the contrary, it is varied, rich and complex in its content and character, and thus deserves a more in-depth study than has so far been done.

II

The present volume has been in the printing stage for more than a decade and some of the chapters were written well-nigh twenty-five years ago. However, the chapters have been revised by Dr. Majumdar and me in the light of new materials and fresh interpretations. In spite of our best efforts there may still be some shortcomings which could not be altogether eliminated. The editorial comments on most occasions appear as footnotes either under the initials of R. C. Majumdar (RCM) or under the word 'editor' or 'ed' or under my initials (KKDG). Shortage of time has forbidden us from including maps, photographs, index and addenda et corrigenda in the present part; they will be appended to the second part. We crave the indulgence of the readers for the inconvenience they will experience.

Regrettably some of the authors of the chapters of this volume, including R. C. Majumdar, are no longer in our midst, and it is painful that Dr. Majumdar did not live to see the volume in print. I pay my homage to Dr. Majumdar and other contributors to the volume, who are no more. I offer my respect to Sri Satchidananda Bhatta Charyya, who in the midst of preparing the press copies of some of
the initial chapters, prematurely passed away. I also offer my respect to the memory of Professor Bisheshwar Prasad, who was looking after the present and other volumes of the series, for his help and cooperation. My grateful thanks are due to Professor R. S. Sharma and Professor Satish Chandra for the help and encouragement they have given me at different stages of the progress of the volume. I am thankful to my friend Karunasankar Ray, Bar-at-law, for evincing keen interest in the publication of this volume. Finally, I must thank Sri Subodh Roy, Srimati Sipra Lahiri and the PPH English editorial department for ready cooperation.

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