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Dr. Arun Kumar
Reader, Department of
History, Mahila College
Khagaul, Magadh University,
Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India

Governance of Gupta period: A critical analysis

Dr. Arun Kumar

Abstract

In contrast to the Mauryas, the Gupta administration was decentralised, though the king exercised all powers but then powers was also delegated to officers and lesser kings ruling all over India. Kingship was hereditary but royal powers was limited by the absence of a firm practice of primogeniture. Unlike the Mauryas, Gupta kings adopted pompous titles such as Maharaja-dhiraja, parameshvara and paramabhataraka which suited that they ruled over lesser kings. The empire seems to be divided into bhuktis (province). The bhuktis were divided into vishyas (districts). Gramika was the head of the village administration. In some ways their political system appears to be feudal in character.

Keywords: Mauryas, Gupta, Administration, Bhukti, power

Introduction

The administration of the Gupta marks the watershed between its past and future traditions of polity and government. In fact, it would not be an exaggerations that the Gupta administration provided the model for the basic administrative structure, both in theory and practice, for the entire early medieval period of Indian history.

The rulers of the Gupta discarded the modest title of *Rajan* had adopted the high surrounding style brought into vogue by the Kushanas. The most characteristic of such titles was *Maharajadhiraja* which was used along with its several variants. In the records of North Bengal, the Gupta emperors are given the trilogy of titles-Paramadaivata Paramabhataraka Maharajadhiraja, which became the distinctive designation of paramount rulers of later times. Besides, the Guptas added other epithets claiming for themselves super-human qualities which raised them almost to the level of gods. In fact, in the Allahabad Pillar inscription Samudragupta is referred to as a god dwelling on earth. All the *smritis* of this period, though in many respects a reformulation of the already prevailing ideas, consistently emphasize on one aspect of royalty—its super-human quality.

The Guptas continued the traditional machinery of bureaucratic administration with nomenclature mostly borrowed or adopted from earlier times. The *mantri* (high minister), whose office is known to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, evidently stood at the head of civil administration. Among other high imperial officers were included the *Mahabaladhikrta* (Commander-in-chief), the *Mahadandanayaka* (general) and the *Mahapratihara* (chief of the place guards). The *Mahabaladhikrta*, probably corresponding to the *Mahasenapati* of the Satavahana kings, controlled a staff or subordinate officers such as the *mahashvapati* (chief of cavalry), *Mahapilupati* (officer in charge of elephants), *Senapati* and *Baladhikrta*. Similarly, the office of the *Mahadandanayaka* may be traced back to the Kushana times. A high ranking officer, heard of for the first time in the Gupta records, but destined to have a long career was the *Sandhivigrahika* (the foreign minister).

Officers such as the *Kumaramatyas* and *Ayuktas* acted as a link between the central and the provincial administration under the Guptas. *Kumaramatyas* was the most important officer of the Gupta. They were appointed by the king in the home province and probably they were paid in cash. Similarly, the *Ayuktas* were entrusted with the task of restoring the wealth of kings conquered by the emperor and sometimes placed in charge of districts or metropolitan towns. The provinces called *bhuktis* were usually governed by officers called *Pradeshikas* of Ashokan empire, or by *Uparikas* corresponding to the princes of royal blood.

Correspondence
Dr. Arun Kumar
Reader, Department of
History, Mahila College
Khagaul, Magadh University,
Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India

The province was often divided into districts known as *vishayas* which were ruled by *Kumaramatyas*, *Ayuktas* or *Vishayapatis*. It is significant that the district officer is habitually said to be nominated by the provincial governor.

A close scrutiny of north Bengal inscriptions reveals that the essential business in connection with the sale of government lands was sometimes carried out by *Kumaramatyas* or other officers of comparable rank in cooperation with the Municipal Board-*Adhistanadhikarana* or the District Office-*Vishayadhikarana* or the *Asthakuladhikarana*-possibly the Rural Board. The Municipal Board in the complete examples is said to consist principally of four members namely the guild president-*Nagarasresthi*, the chief merchant-*Sarthavaha*, the chief artisan- *Prathama kulika* and the chief scribe- *Prathamakayastha*. The precise significance of the Rural Board is unknown, but in one example it is said to be headed by the village elders-*Mahattaras* and also included the village headman-*Ramika* and the householders-Kutumbins. The legends of seals recovered from the site of ancient Vaishali indicate that the District and Municipal Boards were also functioning in north Bihar under the Guptas.

The exact nature of this administrative structure set up by the Guptas has to be understood in the backdrop of the socio-economic organisation of the period. In spite of decrease in the volume of foreign trade the Gupta age was a period of economic expansion promoted by grants of land to enterprising brahmins in the virgin tracts in central India and the Deccan. The period also witnessed a marked growth of private property in land recognised by the law-books and attested by actual sale and purchase of land. The prosperity of the ruling class is indicated by the abundance of gold coins. The use of gold currency strengthened traders and rich artisans whose guilds played an important role in Gupta economy and administration. Conquests of distant regions governed by their petty ruling houses made it necessary for the Guptas to evolve a particular mechanism of relationship with them. The decentralised nature of Gupta administration was conditioned by these factors and their consequences.

The functions of the royal authority underwent a significant change during the Gupta period. The fact that the Gupta kings adopted grandiloquent titles suggest the existence of lesser kings in their empire. The Guptas left a number of conquered states in a position of subordinate independence. We have a long list of frontier kings and republican people, who were brought under various degrees of servitude, but not directly incorporated within the empire by Samudragupta. With the exception of north Bengal, Bihar and U.P., practically the rest of the empire was held by such feudatories as the Parivrajaka and Uccakalpa princes who fulfilled their obligations to the emperor by merely offering homage, paying tributes and presenting their daughters in marriage to him. In later times the so-called Parivrajakamaharajas habitually issued their land grants during the enjoyment of sovereignty by the Gupta emperors. The leading feudatories of the Guptas gradually gained strength with the decline of the empire and literally rose on its ruins to establish their independent kingdoms. The presence of these feudatories must have considerably restricted the effective use of royal authority by the Guptas. However, it can be reasonably surmised that the troops supplied by the feudatories must have accounted for a good portion of the Gupta army. The state no longer enjoyed monopoly over the possession of horses and elephants, which now came to be owned by private individuals. Although land grants mention

quite a few officials, the number of officers associated with the fiscal and economic activities was not as large as in Maurya times. But the significant aspect of the Gupta bureaucracy is that because it was less elaborate and less organised compared to its Mauryan counterpart, it allowed several offices to be combined in the hands of the same person and posts became hereditary. A combination of all these factors naturally weakened direct royal control over the administrative machinery.

The other significant feudal development in the Gupta period was the grant of fiscal and administrative immunities to priests and temples, a practice started with the *Satavahanas* in the Deccan. What distinguished the land charters of the Gupta period however, was the administrative privileges conferred on the beneficiaries. They enjoyed freedom from the interference of all description, which is also found in the *Satavahana* charters. In other words, they were allowed to exercise magisterial and police powers over the inhabitants of the donated village. In practice the beneficiaries exclusively bore the burden of administration in the areas granted to them and exercised a stabilising influence over the rural communities by teaching them the duties of castes and penances. Since a considerable area of imperial administration was managed by feudatories, beneficiaries or local elements, the Gupta rulers did not require as many officials as the Mauryas did. The Guptas therefore neither needed nor possessed the elaborate bureaucracy of the Maurya type. In spite of the strength of the Gupta Emperors institutional factors working for decentralisation were far stronger in the Gupta age.

On the whole the Gupta administration was well organised. But soon after the death of Chandragupta II the lacunae in the decentralisation of the administration crop up. The feudal lords or chiefs in their respective domain asserted their suzerainty, as a result the centre was soon controlled by them. The history of post Gupta period is in fact the history of feudal lords. On its positive side it is to be observed that the designation of Gupta officials continued even after passing away of the Gupta empire. The Early kalacuriyas, the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas of Malkhed and the western chalukyas of Kalyani accepted the Gupta administrative system.

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