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Dr. Arun Kumar
Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Mahila College, Khagaul,
Magadh University, Bihar,
India

Administrative organization in ancient India: A historical perspective

Dr. Arun Kumar

Abstract

The elements of state administration signifying rule by a king with the help of his advisers or assistants may be traced back to the early Vedic period (c. 1500-700 B.C.). In *Rg-Veda* the king is called *gopā janasya* or protector of the people. This implies that he was charged with the maintenance of law and order. Like his divine prototype Varuna, he employed the agency of spies for this purpose. There is no reference in the *Rg-Veda* and the *Atharva Veda* to the king's administration of justice. In two passages of *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* reference is made to the king's *Jyestha* or Lordship and the epithet *Dharmapati* or 'lord of the law' is applied to him. This probably indicates the king's supreme executive authority as well as the supremacy of the king's justice over all other jurisdictions.

Keywords: *Rg-Veda*, king, administration

Introduction

The king levied contributions (*bali*) on his subjects. These probably consisted of a share of the agricultural produce as also of the livestock of the villagers. To judge from the position of the Vedic Aryans as strangers in the midst of a conquered population, the king must have been the leader of the tribal host in time of war. It is significant that Indra, the most characteristic deity of the Vedic pantheon, is figured essentially as the god of war. The title *Senāni* mentioned in the *Rg-Veda* shows that the military administration was separated from the civil even at that time. The Vedic administration was based largely on the household system. The *Senāni* (commander-in-chief) as well as the *Sūta* (charioteer), *Grāmanī* (village headman), *Ksatr* (chamberlain) and the *Samgrahītr* (treasurer) are included in the list of *Ratnins* (jewelbearers) at whose residences the king made offerings to various deities at the *Rājasūya*. A hundred selected sons of *Sūtas* and of *Grāmanis* are included among the guardians of the sacrificial horse dians of the sacrificial horse, and one hundred daughters or of these officers are mentioned among the attendants of queen at the *Asvamedha*. The *Sūta* and the *Gramani* are included in the texts of the *Satapatha Brahmana* in the class non-royal king-makers (*arajano rajakrtah*) immediately after in Rajanvas or nobles who were the royal king-makers. But we are left completely in the dark about the significance of this description.

Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan Periods (c. 700-185 B.C.)

We do not know much about the pre-Mauryan administration. However, in view of what we know of the Mauryan period, it can be surmised that the pre-Mauryan period was marked by the establishment, at least in the politically advanced areas, of a strong centralized administration under the headship of the king. This was based upon the two pillars of administration, a permanent revenue and a standing army. The king, moreover, is described in the records of this period as exercising the supreme executive, judicial and military authority over the kingdom. The creation of a regular administrative service consisting of civil and military officials with more or less well-defined functions is another characteristic of the pre-Mauryan period. The officials are described by such generic terms as *Amatyas* (*Amāccas* in Pāli) and *Mahmatras* (Pali, *Mahamāttas*). A complete demarcation between the king's household and general administration is clearly made in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*. But traces of the old Vedic tradition of household administration are still found in the *Jātakas*. Like the early *Arthaśāstra* writers, Kautilya lays down rules for the recruitment of officials and their selection for specialized posts.

Correspondence Author:
Dr. Arun Kumar
Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Mahila College, Khagaul,
Magadh University, Bihar,
India

The state officials along with members of the royal family and household are included by Kautilya in the consolidated civil list of the king, which groups them in categories with cash salaries fixed for each grade. In the early Buddhist texts, we are told about various categories of officials, such as those in charge of the army, judicial administration, the king's harem, and superintendence of public works. They even decided questions of royal succession in case of incapacity or minority or default of an heir to the throne. We have stories of individual ministers exercising a commanding influence in affairs of state in spite of the difficulties caused by their capricious masters. Kautilya contemplates the king consulting not only his high ministers (*Mantrins*), but in emergencies his Council of Ministers (Mantri-Parisad) as well. And yet the ministers remain merely the king's advisory body, the decision on affairs of state being left entirely to his discretion. We have not a single instance in the records of this period of the king's decision being opposed or even debated by the ministers. The highest ranks in the official hierarchy are occupied, both in the systematic account of Kautilya's *Arthasāstra* and in scattered notices of the Pāli canon and the Jātakas, by the Crown Prince (*Yuvarāja* or *Uparāja*), the king's domestic chaplain (*Purohita*), the military commander (*Senāpati*) and the minister (*Mantrin*).

A striking innovation in state administration during this period was the system of state registers and records as outlined in Kautilya's *Arthasāstra*. A state register of various items of the king's internal and foreign administration, we are told, was to be prepared by the officer in charge of the Records and Public Accounts office (*Akṣapatalādhyakṣa*). Evidently, in the light of these data the *Samāhartā* (Collector-General) prepared his register of villages recording the revenues and other dues payable by the villagers. A census of the rural area enumerating details of tenements and families was prepared, in the first instance, by the rural *Gopa* or officer in charge of 5 or 10 villages. The urban *Gopa* who held charge of 10, 20, or 40 families similarly prepared for his area a census relating to the number of residents, their names and occupations, and their income and expenditure. It is reasonable to infer that this aspect of the Kautilyan state administration reflected the practice of the most advanced states of the time. Another important innovation of this period was the creation of a state postal service consisting of *Dūtas* or messengers, who are included by Kautilya in the king's civil list. References are found in the Jātaka stories to female carrier-birds employed by kings for conveying messages. The use of official seals by the king and high officials is attributed to this period.

The pre-Mauryan period is the age of the first system of state and justice in Indian history. This system is contained in the Dharma Sūtras and in the *Arthasāstra* of Kautilya, the being the only completely preserved specimen of this branch of Indian literature. The state law is derived in the Dharm Sūtras from a two-fold source, namely, the sacred canon (with its auxiliaries) and approved custom. According to the fuller enumeration in Kautilya's *Arthasāstra*, the sources of the state law are the sacred canon, current law, usage and reason. The law codes of the Dharma Sūtras and the *Arthasāstra* were considered to be binding on all sections of the Aryan community. References to the laws of particular states have been preserved only in a few scattered passages of the early Buddhist literature. The customs and

practices of regions and villages, of castes and families and of functional groups are clearly recognized as authoritative sources of law in the Dharma Sūtras. The king is credited in Kautilya's work with the right of issuing executive orders that had the force of law. But there is no reason to think that this marked a revolutionary step towards royal absolutism since its scope was implicitly or explicitly fixed within well-understood limits.

The beginning of a regular system of state judicial administration may be traced to the pre-Mauryan age. The records of this period recognize the prevalence of the king's justice within his kingdom. The state courts were of two grades: those presided over by the king at his capital and those of the subordinate officers. The king's court was regularly constituted and the Dharma Sūtras state that the king or his substitute was to be assisted by a judge and assessors as well as non-official advisers. Kautilya speaks of judges - *Dharmasthas* in the rural areas and *Pauravyavahārikas* in the urban areas. The *Dharmasthas* who sat at the headquarters of 800, 400 and 10 villages might have represented three grades of these officers or acted as itinerant judges at the larger and smaller rural centres. They were required to follow strictly judicial procedure, failing which they were liable to various penalties. Early Buddhist literature mentions a class of judicial officers called by different names (*Viniccayamahāmatas*, *Vohārikamahāmatas* and *Viniccayamaccas*). References are also found in early Buddhist literature to private courts such as the caste councils (*Sabha* and *Parisad*), the councils of kinsmen (*jñāti*) and the councils of functional groups (*sanghas*). The caste councils, we are told, decided family disputes, and the other councils probably decided similar internal disputes among their members. An survival of primitive judgment by ordeal (*divya* the Dharma Sūtras. But of equality of law for all eternal disputes among their members. An interesting survival of primitive methods of administration of justice is the by ordeal (*divya* or *samaya*) which is referred to in Dharma Sūtras. But Kautilya, significantly enough, is completely silent about it. The evidence of the Pāli Buddhist texts about the tendencies of state justice is self-contradictory. Some ages in the Pāli canon point to the application of the principle of law for all subjects by the state courts, while others show how criminals were shielded from justice by the king and high officials. In the Jātakas, we read in some stories that kings gave judgments after regular judicial trials, while other stories tell us how the kings passed judgment even in cases of capital punishment after summary trials.

The first institution of state police may be traced to the pre-Mauryan period. Its full development is recorded, as usual, in Kautilya's *Arthasāstra*, while occasional references are found in other sources. Of the two broad divisions of the regular and the secret police known to records of this period, the former consisted, according to Kautilya, of three tiers of officials: the *Pradestā* (rural) or the *Nāgaraka* (urban) at the top, the rural and urban *Sthānikas* in the middle and the rural and urban *Gopas* at the bottom. In the course of his description of the *Pradestā's* duties, Kautilya tells us how an inquest was held in case of sudden death. This involved a post-mortem examination of the body as well as through police investigation of the crime. The use of torture for extorting confessions from suspects whose guilt was established *prima facie* was known. In Kautilya's work the

secret police is divided into two categories, namely, the peripatetic and the stationary. The secret service men were employed for such varied purposes of general administration as surveillance of the state officials, invigilation of the subjects, suppression of enemies of the state and strengthening of inter-state relations.

Like the institution of the state police that of state jails also begins with the pre-Mauryan period. Stray reference to this institution occur in Dharma Sūtras and the Jātakas. A detailed account of jail administration is to all administration is found in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*.

The earliest system of local government may also be traced from pre-Mauryan period. The structure of local government consisted of a parallel machinery for the administration of the rural and urban areas.

The administration of towns is entrusted in Kautilya's work to the *Nagaraka*, who corresponds to the *Nagaraguttika* of the Jātakas. From Kautilya's description we learn that he has not only to look after the maintenance of law and order (including the enforcement of curfew regulations), but has also to enforce various building and sanitary regulations and to prepare a census of the citizens.

As regards the contemporary republican constitutions, we learn from a number of references in the Pāli Buddhist texts that the republics were ruled by popular assemblies and elected chiefs. The assemblies consisted of fully qualified members of the ruling aristocracy and their regular meeting place was called the *santhagāra*. From one story we learn that the assemblies used to discuss momentous issues of state, like surrender to a besieging force, and elected the executive head with complete freedom. From another story (that of Khanda, chief minister of the king of the Videhas who found asylum at Vaiśālī) in a Buddhist Sanskrit work of the Mūlasarvāstivādin school we learn that the assembly exercised the sovereign right of electing the *Senāpati* or the executive head, while the decrees of the republic were issued jointly in the names of the assembly and the *Senāpati*. We have little direct evidence about the procedure of the republican assemblies. From the much discussed parallel with the well-known procedure of the Buddhist ecclesiastical gatherings we may conclude that official proposals were normally brought forward in the form of resolutions which were declared carried, if there was no opposition. The initiative for bringing forward the proposals, however, must have belonged not to an officer specially selected for the occasion but to the chief magistrate or magistrates, while the methods of settlement of disputes must have differed from those of a gathering of monks.

Passing over the administration of the Nandas about which we know very little and that of the contemporary kingdoms and republics of the Indus valley, we may proceed to the period of their immediate successors, namely, the Imperial Mauryas. In accordance with the old tradition, the Mauryas appear to have combined in themselves the headship of the civil and the military administration. To this Asoka appears to have added the headship of the Buddhist Church, if we are to judge from his decree for the expulsion of schismatic Buddhist monks. Asoka's assumption of the modest title of *Rājan* in contrast to the imperial titles of his Achaemenid predecessors and Hellenistic contemporaries and his avoidance of claim for divine honours adopted by the latter show that he intended his administration to be essentially Indian. The bureaucratic organization of the preceding

period appears to have reached its culmination under Mauryan rule. The creation of a distinct class of officials by Candragupta Maurya is reflected in Megasthenes reference to the Indian caste of 'councillors and advisers' of the king and it is called by the generic title of *Mahāmātras* in Asoka's inscriptions. At the head of the Mauryan bureaucracy stood the council of ministers. Mauryan historical tradition mentions a number of chief ministers, while Asoka in his inscriptions makes a pointed reference to the Council of Ministers (*Parisad*). There seems to be no justification for the far-reaching conclusions of some Indian scholars in recent times that the ministers of Asoka had the right of discussing and even rejecting the emperor's oral orders, of controlling the state funds and of virtually depriving the ruler of his sovereignty in defence of the constitutional laws of the realm. The *Mahāmātras* are divided in Asoka's inscriptions into various categories, some of which have more or less their equivalents in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*. Asoka also created the office of *Dharmamahāmātras* for the enforcement of his law of piety.

The Mauryan period fills a gap between two great epochs of law-making activity in ancient times, namely, that of the principal Dharma Sūtra and of the *Arthaśāstra* codes of state law on the one hand and that of Manu's code on the other. The few references in Megasthenes' work to the penalties for offences current in Candragupta's time breathe the spirit of the penal law of the preceding period. From Pillar Edict IV of Asoka, we learn that even after his conversion to Buddhism he continued the death penalty for crimes, only softening its rigour by giving the convicts three days' respite before execution. The system of state justice of the preceding period appears to have been continued by the Mauryas. From the *Indica* of Megasthenes we learn that Candragupta himself sat in the court for hearing suits of the public. The old division of urban and rural judiciary was continued in Asoka's reign. In his Kalinga Rock Edict No. 1, he tells us how he entrusted *Mahāmātras* with the task of invigilation of the town judiciary by means of periodical tours. The few references in the records of the Mauryas point to the continuance of the State police of the preceding period. The branch of regular police is represented by the Indian caste of *Ephors* (inspectors) or *Episkopoi* (overlookers). Reference to the continuance of the jail administration of the earlier times is found in Pillar Edict V. Here Asoka mentions that he regularly remitted sentences on each anniversary of his coronation. The *Dharmamahāmātras* are charged in Rock Edict V with the duty of protecting prisoners from molestation and of releasing the deserving ones. These measures reflect the humane spirit of jail administration as outlined in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*.

The successive creation of large provinces was necessitated by the expansion of the Mauryan empire. By Asoka's time, as already stated, there were four such provinces, namely, the North-western, Western, and Southern Eastern, with their capitals at Taksasilā, Ujjayinī, Tosālī and Suvarnagiri respectively. These were ruled by prince-vicerovs with the help of local *Mohamātras*. Officers like the *Yavanarāja* Tusāsna and Pusvagupta, 'the Vaisya' held charge of subordinate jurisdictions. The old distinction between the rural and urban administration was continued under the Mauryas. Megasthenes mentions two categories of officials of Candragupta's administration, namely, the *Agromoi*

(market commissioners) and the *Astynomoi* (city commissioners). The *Astynomoi*, according to Megasthenes, were divided into six Boards of five members each, with distinct functions. Of these the Board in charge of the foreign residents is an innovation unknown to Kautilya. Equally original is the coordination of the Boards into a corporate body.

Pre-Gupta and Gupta Periods (c. 185 B.C.-A.D. 700)

The administration of the Sungas, the heirs to the sovereignty of the Mauryas in the Gangā basin, appears to have been a continuation of their immediate predecessors with immediate predecessors with a somewhat looser organization than before. Kings were content with the title of *Rajan*. Provinces were governed by prince-Viceroy titles, and they were assisted by the traditional Council of (*Mantri-pariṣad*). The Satavahanas, while adopting title of *Rājan*, sometimes added the title *Svāmin* (lord) brought into vogue by their Saka contemporaries and rivals. The central administration was run by *Amātyas*, who are known employed in executive and financial offices. Military administration was controlled by officers such as the *Senagopa* equivalent to old *Senāpati*. The provinces were divided into districts which were ruled by *Amātyas* and the villages were in charge of the *Grāmikas* or traditional headmen. Of the Ceta kings of Kalinga the most important was Khāravela. He assumed lofty titles unknown even to the Imperial Mauryas and aspired to become a *Cakravartin* (world-ruler) over the neighbouring lands.

The rule of the foreign dynasties of the pre-Gupta period is an important episode in the history of ancient Indian administration. Some of the Indo-Greek kings assumed, after the example of the Seleucids of Western Asia, the title of *Basileus Megalou* (Great King) and followed the practice of appointing the heir-apparent as joint-king over the whole realm. They organized their Indian dominions under provincial governors bearing the Greek titles of *Strategus* and *Meridarch*. The Indo-Greek system of administration was followed on the whole by the Saka and Parthian rulers of Northern India. But they introduced a new title for provincial governors - *Ksatrapa*. The Kusānas brought with them an exalted conception of monarchy indicated by the new imperial titles on their coin types. They continued the Saka system of provincial government under *Mahākṣatrapas* and *Ksatrapas*, while they introduced two new grades of military (or judicial) officers called *Mahādandanāyakas* and *Dandanāyakas*. But the autonomous cities dating from Indo-Greek times ceased to exist under their rule.

The downfall of the Kuṣāna empire paved the way for an alter growth of republican freedom in the Punjab and Rajasthan. Three of these republics are known from their inscriptions or coins of both. These are the Kunindas of the late 2nd and 3rd century A.D., the Yaudheyas of the late 2nd century A.D., and the Mālavas of the interval between the 2nd and the early 4th centuries A.D.

The period of the Imperial Guptas, the Golden Age of ancient Indian history was marked by a great exaltation of monarchy. They adopted the imperial title of *Mahārājādhiraja* apparently after the model of the foreign rulers of India. From the time of Chandragupta vikramaditya they are described as "equal to the gods Dhanada (kubera) Varuna, Indra and Antaka (Yama)." Their coin types show the nimbus around the king's head. In a number of North

Bengal inscriptions they are given a trilogy of titles (*Paramadaivata Paramabhāttāraka Maharajadhiraja*) which with the slight substitution of *Paramesvara* for *Paramadaivata* became the distinctive designation of paramount rulers in later times.

The Guptas created afresh a system of administration on imperial lines after the downfall of the Mauryan empire. The civil administration apparently was in charge of the *Mantrī* as before. But the supervision of foreign affairs was made over to a new officer called the *Sandhivigrahika* (literally meaning, the minister for war and peace). A number of offices were created with the prefix *mahān* or great. This indicated an upgrading of the old offices or else the institution of a higher order of the same, evidently in keeping with the imperial organization of the administration. A new class of *Amātyas* called the *Kumārāmātyas* comprised not only the high imperial officers but also the officials on the staff of the emperor and the crown prince and those in charge of districts. Three grades of military commands came into existence, namely, those of *Mahābalādhikṛta*, *Mahādandanāyaka* and *Senāpati*. The cavalry, the elephant corps and perhaps also the infantry were organized under separate commands.

In the branch of provincial administration the Guptas adopted the older models with changed official nomenclature and some striking innovations. The provinces (*bhuktis*) were governed, as in Asoka's time, by princes or as in the times of the Satavahanas. by state officers (*Uparikas*). The districts (*visavas*) were ruled by other officers (*Kumārāmātyas*. *Ayuktakas* for *Visayapatis*). In North Bengal and probably also in Bihār, as we learn from the contemporary inscriptions, a Municipal Board (*Adhishthanadhikarana*) or a District Board (*Visayādhikarana*) helped the head of the district or the province, as the case might be, in the disposal of government lands. The Municipal Board consisted on members, namely, the guild-president (*Nagarastresthin*), the chief merchant (*Sārthavaha*), the chief artisan (*Prathamakayastha*) and the chief scribe (*Prathamakayastha*). This marks a bold attempt to associated popular representatives with local administration. After the Guptas, in Northern India king Harsavardhana (606-47) created a sound and efficient administration of the usual type. He assumed the usual imperial titles and was assisted by the traditional Council of Ministers. The officers of the central government included the Minister of Foreign Affairs (*Mahasandi hādhikṛta*), the Commander-in-Chief (*Mahābalādhikṛta*), the head of the accounts department (*Mahakṣapatalika*), besides other of lesser rank. The kingdom was divided into provinces (*bhuktis*) and districts (*viṣayas*). Village administration appears to have been highly official ridden.

In the Deccan, the administration of the Imperial Chālukyas of Vātāpi (c. A.D. 540-753) was marked by the usual characteristics. The kings assumed the familiar imperial titles, the central government was in charge of officers of the old type including a new officer called *Mahāsandhivigrahika* (Minister of Foreign Affairs), the districts were governed by state officers (*Visayapatis*) and the villages were controlled by the headmen (*Grāmakūtas*) probably in association with the executive body (*Adhikūrins*) of the leading householders of the village (*Mahattaras*).

Post-Gupta Period (c. A.D. 700-1200): The administration of the Rājput states of Northern India during this period was of the bureaucratic type known at that time. The kings assumed the customary imperial titles, a number of high civil and military officials like the *Mantri*, *Senapati*, *Aksapalika* and *Bhāndāgārika* held charge of the central administration, the provinces and districts called by different names were governed by appropriate officials, and the traditional headmen or the executive body of village elders controlled the administration of the village.

In the Deccan, the Rāstrakūtas of Mānyakheta and the Chalukyas of Kalyāna successively continued the traditional type of administration under the king and various officers of the central government, who were known by old and new titles. The governors of provinces and districts were called by different titles, and they enjoyed a position of high authority and dignity. The towns under Rastrakuta rule were in charge of prefects (*purapatis* or *Nagara-patis*) or sheriffs (*Ur-gavundas*), while the villages were controlled by the headmen (*Gramakutas*) and bodies of elders (*Mahattaras*) or else village assemblies (*Mahajanas*). The corporate bodies mentioned above, enjoyed a large measure of self-government. They attested gifts by private individuals, received assignments of local taxes, and made grants of land for pious purposes.

In South India, the administration of the leading powers of this period, namely, the Pandyas and the Cholas, was of the standard type with the king and a bureaucracy of high officials controlling the central government. The later Chola and Pandya kings assumed high imperial titles. Among the latter there was the peculiar institution of joint-kings or co-regents. The office of Prime Minister was known to the Pandya administration, while the Cholas had instead a body of executive officials (*Udankuttam*), serving as liaison officers between the king and the bureaucracy. The grant of lands by the Chola kings for pious and charitable purposes involved a highly complex official procedure under the guidance of a chain of officials. A land revenue survey of the whole kingdom was carried out by the great Chola emperor Rajaraja I (A.D. 985-1014), and fresh surveys were undertaken by his successors from time to time. Well organized village assemblies with wide powers of self-government functioned under the rule of the Pandyas and the Cholas. The village assembly (called *Ur* or *Sabha*) had an executive body (*Alunganam*) - or various executive committees (*Variyams*), the latter being elected by the members according to rules framed by themselves. The assemblies enjoyed such high reputation for integrity and efficiency that they received endowments in cash from kings for pious purposes and were appointed trustees for the proper administration of temple funds. Under Chola rule, the assemblies kept their own records of rights and had their own officials for assisting them in their proceedings without sharing in their deliberations. They decided disputes, granted lands, founded and maintained hospitals, took charge of charitable endowments and controlled taxes.

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