

A Study of Administrative System in India: The Mouryan Period

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Abstract

The present study is to examine the administrative system in the ancient India, specifically the Mouryan period. This period, for examination was taken mainly due to the richness of the original material available. Not only important indigenous contemporary sources like the Arthashastra of Kaumilya and inscriptions of Asoka are available, but also valuable fragmentary accounts given by several Greek writers, some of whom had direct and firsthand knowledge of the country and its government, like the Indica of Megasthenes. Chandragupta Maurya was the founder of India's first great empire, and his minister Kaumilya helped to establish the institutions that sustained it. The empire grew in size, wealth, and culture under his son and grandson, reaching its zenith under Emperor Asoka. Moreover, the post-Mauryan period from 200 B.C. to 300 A.D., witnessed the rise of many states all over the Indian sub-continent. Some were small whereas others were large such as the kingdom of the KushaGas which extended into central Asia. We can see not only the rise of multiple political powers in different parts of the subcontinent but also the introduction of new features in art, architecture and religion, the spread of commerce and trades also brought the sub-continent together in this period.

Keywords: *Arthshastra, Administration, Mouryan.*

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian administration can be traced to its earliest time in the form of monarchical system. Since the earliest times, the monarchical system was used for public administration in order to execute the governmental functions. Although, a number of administrative organizations and system rose and fell in our long history, but there are two basic features of the Indian administrative system which continued right down the ages- the importance of the villages as a primary unit and co-ordination between the two opposite trends of centralization and decentralization. To put it in the short, present administration system is a developed since Vedic period. The earliest sources are the Vedas, Buddhist literature and Jain canonical works, the Astadhyayi of Panini, Mahabhasya of Patanjali and the works of the Kalidasa. They throw welcome light on dark corners of history. The two Epics- the RamayaGa and Mahabharata give interesting pictures of the religious and social conditions, but as chronicles of political events they seem lamentably full of tale-telling and chronological aberrations. Next come the PuraGas, the most important PuraGas are Matsya, Vayu, Vishnu, Brahmanda, Bhagavata and Bhavisya. Most of these have got no historical value but they sometimes treat contemporaneous dynasties or rulers as successive, or omit some of them entirely

The powers of administering the states were centralized in the hands of the king during the ancient period in India. During the Vedic period the king was assisted in his work by many officers. He was surrounded by a circle of his friends and principal officers. There is a reference regarding this in the two epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, and in Manu Smriti and Sukra Niti as well. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, a detailed account about the offices of the state for the first time in the history of India is obtained. By this time administrative system was fully developed. Thus the development of the ancient Indian administration had reached its peak during the reigns of Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka. Mauryan administrative institutions were further developed during the period of the Guptas. Their period witnessed multifarious activities in the field of administration. The decentralization process had started in ancient India. As a result of this, empires were divided into provinces, provinces into districts and districts into urban and rural centers from administrative angle. During the ancient period state administration was divided into numerous departments.

In Vedic times the number of such departments was limited. Gradually, the number of such departments increased and their jurisdiction extended. For this we get many references can be obtained from Vedic literatures and subsequent sources. In ancient Indian administration there is also found a description of the principles of public administration. Thus, the principle of hierarchy had been given a practical shape and seeds of co-ordination were present between different departments. Such

a full-fledged administrative system existed in the reigns of Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka. Great emphasis was placed on observation and inspection along with the principle of hierarchy (Weber, 1988). Like, the present day personnel system mention is made in ancient administration system of the recruitment, qualifications, salaries, leave, pension etc., of government employees. At that time merit, efficiency and being a member of the elite group were given special emphasis. During the time there existed the organization of a central office where all the government records were kept. This was like the secretariat of the government, in which various government functionaries, including officers worked. Mention of such an office is found in Mauryan times and Chola kingdom. The king appointed personal secretary as well. In brief, the main function of the central office was the control and inspection of provincial, regional and local government. In the early Vedic period there were many tribes who elected their own chiefs and he handled all their responsibilities and the administration of the tribes and the Sabha (Assembly of elders) and Samiti (Assembly of people) were the tribal assemblies. The chief protected the tribe but had no revenue system or hold over land thus wars were resorted to and the booty shared among the tribes (Margenthau 1978, 2012, Frei 1994, Scheuerman 2009, Reichwein 2010). The first form of the 'State' in India can be traced back to the times of Manu (original name Satyavrata) the first King and progenitor of mankind according to Hinduism.

By the time Kautilya wrote the Artha Shastra the Indian Administrative system was well developed and the treatise of Kautilya gives a very first detailed account of the same. We will discuss that below (Bajpai, Kanti P, Mattoo, Amitabh, 1996). The Mauryan period was the era of major development in Indian Administration. Decentralization was prevalent as the village units played a very important role as the base of administration since ancient times. Empires were divided into provinces, provinces into districts, districts into rural and urban centers for efficient administration. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a work on Varta (Science of Economics) and Dandaniti (statecraft/Management of State Administration) existing in the Mauryan rule. It covers the topics like functions of the chief executive, hierarchy, bureaucracy, corruption, local administration, supervisory management, motivation, morale and Job description. The most noticeable aspect of the Arthashastra is its emphasis on Public Welfare even in an autocratic agrarian State. That is where its timelessness lies. Kautilya viewed the State as an institutional necessity for human advancement. According to him the State comprises of eight elements - king, minister, country, fort, treasury, army, friend and enemy. And State's prime function was to maintain law and order, punishing wrong doers and protecting subjects. The empire was divided into a Home Province capital territory or administrative unit under direct control of the central government and four to five outlying provinces (States), each under a

Governor or viceroy responsible to the central government. The provinces possessed a good amount of autonomy in this feudal-federal type of organization. Provinces were further divided into districts, districts into rural and urban centers with a whole lot of officials in charge at various levels. Kautilya stated that the king was like the Father and all the people or subjects of the country or empire were his children. This shows how he takes care of them. This attitude of Kautilya conceptualized as welfare state in modern times. Corruption was not tolerated at all.

The Guptas carried forward the Mauryan legacy of administration in many respects. Links between Kautilyan Administration and Modern Personnel Administration and Public Administration

1. Personnel Administration: A system of recruitment was there and job description as well. Salaries were clearly spelled out for ministers and government officials. It also stated a view of job permanency and increment in salary or position (promotion) if the official concerned provided extraordinary service. Personnel were to be transferred from time to time as per Kautilya because it would avoid corruption and misappropriation of government funds. Removal and tenure of officials and ministers were at the pleasure of the King just like the Governor and Attorney General, etc. hold office at a term that specifies 'pleasure of the President'.

2. Public Administration: The King is the sole source of authority and appoints and dismisses personnel and divides the work of govt. into different ministries under several ministers and officials. Kautilya stresses on the need for specialist and generalist personnel at different levels of administration with full accountability to the King, thus talks about division of labor and coordination between them for efficient administration. There was a clear system of recruitment, pay and terms and conditions of service very much resembling the modern State. Modern state is more concerned about development whereas the Kautilyan model talks about collecting revenue and employing activities to help in expediting and ensuring revenue, so it talks mainly of control instead of development.

In order to accomplish the purpose of having a crime free society and a welfare state a well-defined and well organized law and order system was laid by the Mauryan rulers. The *Arthashastra* of Kaumilya and the inscriptions of Asoka throw welcome light on the maintenances of law and order during Mauryan period. The *Indica* of Megasthenes also gives a vivid description of Chandragupta's administration. Monarchy was the prevailing form of government in the Mauryan period and it had become hereditary. Usually the eldest son succeeded to the throne. Considerable care was taken to train him properly in the art of government and administration. He was well acquainted with the traditional culture as embodied in the Vedic lore, but the *Arthashastra* emphasizes that he should be an expert in economic and science of government. For this special effort was made to train him in drafting,

public accounts and all military tactics and exercises. He was to attend upon elderly statesmen and imbibe from them their accumulated experience. The *Arthashastra* and *Mahabharata* are particular about describing in detail the qualities that a king was to cultivate and the training he was to receive. Kaumilya and Megasthenes refer to the extremely busy time table of the king which permitted him hardly six hours rest at night. Only a small part of his time was spent in bath, meals and rest. Almost throughout the day he was busy either reporters or officers or in participating in the meeting of the ministry or in surveying the military parades or in judging causes and suits.

Kaumilya emphasizes the concept that the king stands for *daG*

a (punishment) which upholds *dharma*, the law that governs the four castes and *Asramas* or stages of life and also the customs of the people based on it. Which protests all it was *Rsja-dharma* who protected all *dharmas* and it would have declined without his protection. The *danda*, enforces *dharama* equally among all, would ensure happiness in this world and pave its way for the next world too. Next in importance to the king were the ministers. Kaumilya says:

“...Sovereignty is possible only with assistance. A single wheel can never move. Hence the king shall employ ministers and hear their opinion.”

SELECTION PROCESS AND CRITERIONS FOR OFFICERS

Kautilya had his own criteria for selection of officers for the same. In view of the great importance of the position of the ministers, Kaumilya held the view that the appointments of various ministerial positions shall depend solely on qualifications and not on the considerations of family, or backstairs influence. Before employing ministers on responsible duties, their characters were tested by secret agents. Once basic qualifications were met he tested them on their attitude to piety, lucre or revenue, lust, fear. Those who completed the criteria of piety were appointed as judges or magistrates and those who crossed the test of revenue became revenue collectors, and those pass the test of lust are appointed to the king's harem. The candidates passing the test of fear are appointed as king's bodyguards and personal staff. And those who pass all the tests are appointed as councilors. There were two courts according to the *Arthashastra* called the *Dharmasthya* (civil cases court) where the matters are disposed of on basis of *dharma*, procedural law, conventions, royal decree, and *Kantakashodhana* (criminal cases court) where accused is convicted on basis of testimony and eye witness of spies, etc.

The number of ministers varied according to circumstances, from three or four to twelve. Sometimes one of them was appointed prime minister. Individual ministers were in charge of separate departments. The king may ask his ministers for the opinion, either individually or collectively, and ascertain their ability by judging over the reasons they assign for their opinions. The evidence from the *Mudrarakshasa*

shows how very often the prime minister counted much more than the king. In addition to the body of ministers, there was a council to assist the king in the administrative work. From Asoka's rock edict VI, it appears that the council of ministers continued its normal meetings even when the king was out on tour. It was also the duty of the central government to secure a uniformity of administration. Asoka was particular to bring it about by issuing a number of edicts to guide the subordinate officers. Asoka created the new class reporters (prativedaks) who were posted everywhere and they reported king the affairs of the people at any time. He said that prativedaks can report to me any time, while I am eating, in the harem, in the inner apartment, in the mews, even in the private grounds and in the parks. King Bimbisara, who had the sovereignty of 80,000 villages, is said to have once called an assembly of their 80,000 chiefs such big councils could, however, be summoned only on rare occasions. There was a smaller council, too, which formed a regular part of the machinery of government. According to Kaumilya the numbers of members depends on the requirement of the dominion. Mahabharata state that 4 BrahmaGas, 8 Kcatriyas, 21 Vaisyas, 3 Sûdra and 1 Suta formed the State Council and out of this body of 37, 'the king selected 8 as ministers.' while the policy was formulated by the council and the ministers, the detailed work of administration was carried on by a bureaucracy. At the head of the bureaucracy were a few high officials whose numbers and status must have varied in different ages and different States. There were other officers like Viceroys and Ambassadors, whose sphere of work lay in distant parts of the country. All these formed the members of the higher branch of administration.

THE ROLE OF SPIES

The spies also played an important role in the administration of the justice of the empire. They helped the judges to solve the cases. Megasthenses called these spies Overseers. They reported secretly to the king on important matters related to the city and the army. Spies were called *dutas* in the text *Arthasastra*. They delivered the messages to the judges or to the king without the fear or favors to anyone. The qualifications for this officer were also not simple. The term *duta* also occurs in the inscriptions of Asoka. The spies served to keep the king of all that happens in the empire and to his neighbors. According to *Arthasastra* the duty of the emissaries or *dutas* were to consisted in transmission of messages, maintenance of treaties, sowing seeds of dissension among friends, fetching secret forces, winning the favor of the envoy and government officers of the enemy. The mission entrusted to them seems to be the spreading the peace and goodwill between the respective states and help in the judiciary system of the empire. Some spies moved in the guise of students, some in that ascetics and some in the guise of merchants, recruitment was also made from the class of nuns, prostitutes and astrologers. Some of them were operated in one place while others moved from one place to another. Kaumilya described the method

of detection of crimes with the help of spies. To curb the menace of corruption Kaumilya advocated a higher level of strictness and control in administration. Spies were appointed to monitor and control illegal activities and corruption in the administration. They were to keep a watch even over the activities of accountants and clerks, for reporting cases of fabrication of accounts. Kaumilya was proactive in laying down traps to catch public functionaries with loose morals and inclination to resort to bribery or seek undue favor. Through the help of the spies the pure and impure character of the ministers was detected. Asoka too maintained the secret police and network of spies that he had inherited as a part of his extensive and powerful bureaucracy. Asoka called them *prativedaks*. (V.A. Smith). The Mauryan Empire was divided into a number of provinces.

POLICIES FOR PUBLIC AND NATURE HYGIENE

The welfare state of the Mauryan period paid full attention to public hygiene. Every house was to have a dunghill and an outlet for refuse water, throwing of refuse or dirt or a carcass on the road was an offence. It further safeguarded the health of the citizen by penalizing adulteration of grains, oils, salts and medicines. It took adequate measures against epidemics. When a famine broke out, state granaries were utilized for providing relief and seeds; an extra taxation was imposed upon the rich in order to relieve the poor. Government agencies were alert against forest breaking out and tried to mitigate the damage of monsoon floods. The moral welfare of the subjects was also a concern for the state, gambling, drinking and prostitution were under rigorous control. Literature and education were encouraged, articles required for scarifies and temples were exempted from customs duties.

Kautilya's arthashastra deals with a proper strategy and system of centralized autocracy with a welfare objective in mind before performing any function by the king and his minister. Weaknesses of the Kautilyan State:

1. Over charged with supervision - too much of checks and balances.
2. Prominence on individuals instead of institutions.
3. Fundamental mistrust of officials.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to focus on the administrative system, specifically in the concern of human rights and humane services in the ancient India during the rule of Mouryan dynasty. The main problem before any administration in India has always been the maintenance of peace, law and order in the country. Only a just king augments the three means of happiness i.e. virtue, pleasure and wealth and an unjust destroys these means of happiness. A king, who properly inflicts, prospers, but is destroyed if he who is voluptuous, partial, and deceitful. No doubt that *Arthasastra* is the most important source to gives us a picture of administration, economy, law and justice of the country. Kaumilya defined broadly the maintenance of social order as well as

order in the sense of preventing and punishing criminal activity. The first clear statement of rights is found in Kaumilya's *Arthashastra*, where justice was assured as a fair trial and the right to produce witnesses. Citizens had a right to trade and commerce, right to inheritance and to get standard wages. Women's right to stridhana were recognized, right to widow remarriage and in some cases even the right to divorce the husband. Also in the plays of Kalidasa, woman seems to be a sacred name to him. Kalidasa repeatedly refers to the anxiety of the parents to get their daughters married to suitable persons (Ratnamayidevi Dikshit, 1964). Manu Sm[iti] described that the king should support all his subjects without any discrimination, in the same manner as the earth supports all living beings. Manu. IX, 311 declares this is a forceful declaration. Just as mother earth gives equal protection to all irrespective of religion or caste of individuals, it is obligatory for the state to give equal protection to all (Mandagadde Rama Jois, 2010). According to Kaumilya, Leniency shall be shown in imposing punishments on the following: a pilgrim, an ascetic, anyone suffering from illness, hunger, thirst, poverty, fatigue from a journey. The spies were also played an important role in the administration of the justice of the empire. They helped the judges to solve the cases and were called *dutas* in the text *Arthashastra*. They delivered the messages to the judges or to the king without the fear or favors to anyone (V.S. Agrawala, 1953). Foreign Writers: The Indica of Megasthene, the Seleucid ambassador at the Mauryan court, gives important information about the Mauryan capital administration system and social life, the institutions, geography and products of India. In the time of the Mauryas the theft was very rare occurrence (S.K. Aiyangar, 1977). The earliest epigraphic reference to Sati in Indian history comes from the Eran pillar inscription. (Kiran Pawar, 1996). In the Satavahana period, women were prominent in social life and held property in their own right is seen from records of their lavish charity mentioned we only find in the inscriptions. Temples, Stupas and monasteries give us information about the artistic achievements and religious devotions of the people and princes alike (Tripathi, 1992). So in conclusion it can be said that during the ancient Indian period, India was perhaps best administrated and much advanced under the Mauryas.

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