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## UNIT 24 ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS IN NORTH INDIA

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### 24.1 INTRODUCTION

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The study of administration in early India has to be understood in terms of the nature of polity and politics. While it is true that early Indian states were mostly monarchical, early Indian polity was not static, but experienced many changes. There is indeed a rich historiography of early Indian polity and administration. The study of the administration in India in the past was initiated, like many other facets of Indian history, by western—more precisely, colonial historians. In this historiography India was perceived as a country steeped in religious and philosophical speculations and paid little attention to mundane matters, including power and statecraft. Later, the historians of the Utilitarian school derided early Indians as incapable of political activities and experiences. The polity that existed before the colonial times was characterised by the concepts of Oriental Despotism and the eternal village community. Both the concepts denied any possibilities of change in political and administrative system. A turning point was the discovery of Kautiliya's *Arthashastra* in 1905 by R. Shamasastri. The availability of the edited Sanskrit text and its English translation in the next ten years clearly demonstrated that early Indian thinkers considerably contributed to political ideas. This led to the publication of a plethora of studies on early Indian statecraft and administrative systems. Many of these studies were penned by nationalist historians who often argued that many of the modern political ideas were anticipated by ancient Indian thinkers. Thus the prevalence of republics, democratic polity, constitutional monarchy and even a welfare state was argued for in this kind of historiography. From the 1950s onwards Marxist historiography highlighted that early Indian polity and administration was neither static nor changeless, but had a dynamic character which were further interlinked with existing society, economy and culture. It was also pointed out that administrative systems in early India were not mere applications of the ideals laid down in the theoretical treatises like the *Arthashastra* and the *Dharmasastras*. In-depth studies of inscriptions and various types of literary sources suggest that administrative systems did not always conform to political precepts which are

recommended by law-givers. The recent decades have paid particular attention to the formation of the state in early India. The very search for a 'process' implies that the polity in early India underwent several phases or stages. The emergence of the state from the pre-state situation was not merely a political event, but was associated with major changes in society, economy and culture. The advent of a state is generally connected with the growing social complexities and a sharper social differentiation than one finds in a pre-state situation. In this unit you will be introduced to the continuity and changes in the administrative system in North India from the Vedic times to the post-600 CE period.

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## 24.2 ADMINISTRATION IN THE VEDIC TIMES

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The earliest traces of a complex administrative system in India may go back to the days of the mature Harappan civilisation (c. 2600-1750 BC). Though the nature of the Harappan state cannot be grasped at the present state of our knowledge (because the Harappan script is yet to be deciphered), there is little doubt that an impressive authority held its sway over the far-flung Harappan civilisation. But for this administrative authority it would have been impossible to maintain for several centuries the very high standard of civic life, urban layout, a standardised weights and measures system and some uniformity in its material culture.

The earliest literary creation of India, the *Rigveda* (c. 1500-1000 BC) offers only meagre information on political life. The term *Raja*, generally translated as king, is already encountered in the *Rigveda*. Recent studies of the *Rigveda* however do not accept that the *Rigvedic raja* was a full-fledged monarch. Typical features of a mature monarchy, like a well defined territory, a subject population, dynastic succession, a strong army and a resource base, are conspicuous by their absence in the *Rigveda*. The *Rigvedic raja* did not bear usual epithets of an ancient Indian king, such as *Narapati* (lord of men), *Bhupati* (lord of the soil), *Adhipati* (overlord), *Mahipati* (lord of the earth). He was known as *Gopati* (lord of cattle), *Vispati* (leader of the clan or tribe), etc. A perusal of the *Rigveda* shows that the *Rigvedic* society was not a fully sedentary one, but was a combination of pastoral and agricultural pursuits. The *Rigvedic raja* did not rule over a fixed territory but was the chief of a clan. Thus the most famous political personality of the *Rigveda*, Sudas, was a *Raja* of the Tritsu-Bharata clan but he was not known to have been a ruler over a definite territorial unit. The *Rigvedic raja* seems to have corresponded more to a chieftain of a clan than the head of a monarchical state. He was the leader of the clan regularly participating in wars which were called *Gavishti* (literally search for cattle). Thus the wars in the *Rigveda* were fought largely for cattle but not for territorial expansion, a feature typically associated with the monarchical state. Under such circumstances it is unlikely to find any reference in the *Rigveda* to the administration of a kingdom.

At this juncture one comes across in the later *Vedic* texts (c. 1000-500 BC), the earliest possible references to some assistants of the *Vedic* ruler. They are described in the later *Vedic* texts as the 'bejewelled ones' (*Ratnins*). Among them were the leader of the fighting force (*Senapati*), the collector of a share or one who apportioned the share (*Bhagadugha*), the keeper of the dice (*Akshavapa*) and such like. These definitely do not signify regular administrative offices, but speak of growing complexities in the Vedic polity that required the presence of a few functionaries serving the ruler.

The later Vedic literature also refers to the earliest known collection of an impost, or a levy probably on agricultural produce (*Bali*). But this does not imply either a regular revenue demand or the prevalence of a revenue collection machinery. The rate of the *Bali* was not a fixed one and therefore there is little possibility of the assessment of the leviable agrarian revenue. In view of the uncertainties of the collection of *Bali* it was perhaps not possible for the Vedic ruler to raise resources sufficient to maintain a regular army. In view of the possible absence of a regular army and also of a revenue system the Vedic polity was at best a proto-state, on the threshold of the complex state system. But a full-fledged territorial state polity had not probably emerged yet. Moreover, the Vedic literature highlights the importance of three popular assemblies, the *Vidatha*, the *Sabha* and the *Samiti*. It is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of these three assemblies. However the *vidatha* seems to have been a more primitive assembly than the *sabha* and the *smiti* because it combined in it political and cultural functions and was also involved in the distribution of the available social wealth among the members of Rigvedic clans (*Jana, Gana, Vish*). The *Sabha* and the *Samiti* were attended by the members of the clan and by the Vedic Raja as well whose power seems to have been to some extent checked by these popular assemblies. Though the *Sabha* and the *Samiti* faded out in the subsequent periods with the emergence of monarchical polity, the possibilities of popular participation in polity continued in the non-monarchical organisations (*Ganasangha/ganarajya*) of the post-Vedic period.

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### 24.3 ADMINISTRATION DURING THE AGE OF THE JANAPADAS

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The period from c. 600 BC to 325 BC marks the advent of territorial states (*Janapada/Mahajanapada*) in North India. Most of these *Mahajanapadas* were kingdoms (*Rajya*) and a few of them non-monarchical oligarchies or chiefdoms (*Ganasanghas/Ganarajya*). The polity in a monarchical set up undoubtedly revolves around the king who ascended the throne by virtue of being born in a particular ruling house (dynastic succession). The king rules over a subject population (*Praja*) over a specific territory (*Janapada*, literally meaning a territory where a people or *Jana* first set its feet or *Pada*). This is surely a much more complex and impersonal system than the chiefdom where the chief of the clan is often connected with other members of the clan by kinship ties. The political history of North India during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE demonstrates the presence of a few large monarchical powers which commanded formidable armies and subjugated their lesser contemporaries. One can, therefore, reasonably infer the presence of a regular army in the monarchical polity. It is also no accident that the ruler would be assisted by regular administrators in the management of the state. The Buddhist canonical literature informs us about two very efficient and high ranking functionaries of Magadha Mahajanapada, namely *Vassakara* and *Sunidha* who served under the powerful king Ajatasatru. That his father Bimbisara had already been served by many rural level administrators would be evident from the reference to *Gramanis* appointed by Bimbisara.

On the other hand the non-monarchical Sakya clan obviously had no single ruler but 7707 Rajas who were not kings but Kshatriya chiefs. Matters of administration and politics were openly discussed and debated in the *Ganarajya* of Vajji in the assembly hall (*Santhagara*). Pali canonical texts tell us about the seven stages of judicial

administration in the same *Ganarajya*. The *Ganarajyas* also had a commander of the fighting force (*Senapati*). Whether the non-monarchical clan had the sufficient resources to maintain a large and strong army like the monarchies is difficult to ascertain.

The importance of administrators and state functionaries was for the first time clearly recognised by the *Arthashastra*, a celebrated ancient Indian treatise on statecraft. The *Arthashastra* laid down that the state was composed of seven elements (*Prakriti*). The most important element was of course the ruler (*Svami*) followed by second element, *Amatya*. All political theorists of ancient India uniformly recognised that only the ruler or the king was more important than the *Amatya* which stands for an administrator, an officer of the state. Kautilya explains the indispensability of the *Amatya* in this way: 'Rulership is possible only with assistance; a single wheel cannot move a vehicle'. It clearly implies that though the king was certainly the head of the monarchical state he could not rule single-handed without the assistance of administrative officers or *Amatyas*. Most theoretical treatises would consider the three terms – *Amatya*, *Mantri* (minister) and *Sachiva* (secretary)— as interchangeable or synonymous terms. The *Arthashastra* presents a different opinion. According to it, an *Amatya* is to be appointed on the basis of the performance of a candidate in a test of deception (*upadha*). There are four such tests of deception relating to money, fear, lust and righteousness. A person for example will be placed in the department of Finance if he is not allured by the deception in money matters. Thus the appointment of *Amatya* to a particular administrative department is based on his performance in a given test. The *Arthashastra* further recommends that the person who passes all four tests of deception is obviously a more capable administrator and therefore he should be appointed as a minister (*Mantri*). Thus the *Arthashastra* clearly distinguished a minister from an ordinary administrator. In the *Arthashastra* we also find the first attempt at the gradation of the administrative offices on the basis of a differentiated salary structure. The highest officers of the realm are entitled to a salary of 48,000 panas while the lowest ranked officials were paid 720 panas per year. In another list of officials Kautilya mentions 18 highest administrators of the realm.

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## 24.4 ADMINISTRATION OF THE MAURYANS PERIOD

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A much clear image of the administrative system in a large monarchical state emerges with the coming of the Maurya Empire (c. 325 to 187 BC). At the height of its power the Maurya empire embraced a vast territory from Afghanistan in the North West to Karnataka in the South and from Kathiawar in the West to Orissa (if not North Bengal also) in the East. It was indeed a nearly pan Indian empire with its capital at Pataliputra (Patna). The availability of diverse source materials has enabled historians to understand the Mauryan administration system. The Greek accounts of Megasthenes (and its summary and quotations by later Greek writers), Asoka's edicts and the *Arthashastra* throw light on the Mauryan administration. The possibility of a central and provincial (and also locality level) administrative organisation is seen for the first time in the Maurya realm. The pivotal feature of the entire Maurya administration and specially central administration was the Maurya emperor himself. The central administrative machinery seems to have been operative in what were 'metropolitan' (Magadha) and 'core areas' (located in the Ganga Plains). In spite of their mastery over almost the entire sub-continent the Maurya rulers used the rather simple title *Raja* (literally translated as malka and basileos respectively in the Aramaic and Greek edicts of Asoka.)

Megasthenese, the Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, impresses upon us the personal zeal of the emperor in administration and his very busy daily schedule. This has a close correspondence to Asoka's personal efforts and striving (*Pakama/Prakrama*) to disburse matters of statecraft (*Athakamma*). Kautilya places before the ruler the lofty ideal of ensuring happiness of his subjects (*Prajasukha*), and not pursuing his own. What is good for the subjects is, according to the *Arthashastra*, beneficial for the ruler. An even loftier ideal of paternalistic rulership was announced by Asoka who declared that all men were his children (*Sabe munise paja mama*). Asoka also considered that all his efforts were in a way a repayment of his debt to his subjects.

The Maurya ruler was indeed the head of all executive functions of the realm. All principle functionaries of the government were directly appointed by and responsible to the Maurya emperor. Most of the early Indian theoretical texts considered the king to be only an upholder of the established norms, customs and law (*Dharmapravartaka*), but not a source of law. The *Arthashastra* seems to have departed from this tradition as it recognised the royal proclamation (*Rajasasana*) to be an effective source of law. Significantly enough, Asoka's edicts as administrative promulgations form a close parallel to the *Rajasasana* of Kautilya.

Though the *Arthashastra* certainly recommended the appointment of full-fledged ministers, no edict of Asoka categorically mentioned any Maurya minister. Megasthenes informs us of the 'the counsellors and assessors' from among whom the highest officers of the realm were recruited. One may guess but cannot prove that the counsellors – different from assessors – could have been the Maurya ministers. In two edicts of Asoka are mentioned the *Parisa*. The term *Parisa* is often taken to mean *Mantriparisad* or a council of ministers. The *Arthashastra* differentiates a member of the *Mantriparisad* from a full-fledged *Mantri* since the former receives 12000 *Panas* as salary against the salary of 48000 for a *Mantrin*. In other words a member of the ministerial council was given a rank inferior to that of a full-fledged minister. Asoka instructs his messengers to inform him at any time in case there was a difference of opinion among the members of the *Parishad*. It is, therefore, reasonable to infer that the *Parishad* was a deliberative body, but in which the presence of Maurya emperor was not mandatory. It is unlikely that the *Parishad* had any executive authority. The *Arthashastra* recognised that the actual burden of the administration should be assigned to a large number of departmental heads (*Adayaksha*). However, the term *Adayaksha* never occurs in Asoka's edicts. The officers under Asoka are termed as *Pulisas/Purushas* (*Rajapurushas*). They were of three different grades; high (*Ukaya*), middle (*Majhima*) and low (*Gevaya*). The highest ranked officers during Asoka's time were known as *Mahamatras*. They were of the following types:

- a) those in charge of frontier areas (*Amata-mahamatra*)
- b) those in charge of the pasture grounds (*Vachabhumika-mahamatra*)
- c) those in charge of women or the inner chamber of the Mauryan palace (*Itihakamahamatara*)
- d) those in charge of propagation of Ashoka's *Dhamma* or the Law of Piety (*Dhamma – mahamatra*)

One of the salient features of the Maurya central administration was the army. The Greek accounts narrate that the Maurya army consisted of six lakh soldiers. While this

is definitely an exaggerated figure it nevertheless reflects the very large size of the Maurya army by which the Mauryas carved out a very extensive empire. What is evident from the Greek account is the presence of at least four units in the army: infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephant forces. Megasthenese reports that the Mauryas maintained a navy by which he probably implied a flotilla of boats on the navigable rivers, but not a full-fledged navy in the modern sense of the term. According to Megasthenese, administration of the Maurya army was entrusted to six boards each consisting of five members (therefore in all 30 members). No such boards appear in the *Arthashastra* which entrusts the management of infantry, cavalry, chariot and elephant forces to respective *Adhayakshas*. Closely connected to the military administration was an espionage system. The Mauryas were probably the first Indian power to have developed and implemented a regular secret service. Megasthenese spoke eloquently of the trustworthiness of these secret agents. The *Arthashastra* divides the secret agents (*Gudhapurusha*) into two broad categories; the roving (*Sanchara*) and the stationary (*Samstha*) spies who are sub-divided into nine types. The *Arthashastra* recommended the employment of the spies not only to gather secret information but also to eliminate a suspect element, if necessary, by force, fraud and other dubious methods.

It is not difficult to imagine that the maintenance of a large and diverse category of officers and also a sizeable army required the availability of enormous resources. The collection and mobilisation of resources could be ensured by an efficient revenue system. Kautilya recommends the collection of taxes by the samaharta (the Collector General of Taxes) from as many as seven heads of revenue:

- 1) fortified urban centres (*Durga*)
- 2) countryside (*Rashtra*)
- 3) mines (*Khani*)
- 4) irrigation projects (*Setu*)
- 5) forests (*Vana*)
- 6) pasture ground (*Vraja*)
- 7) trade routes (*Vanikpatha*)

Of these the most important was of course the taxes from agrarian sector. Megasthenese and other Greek writers corroborate that the peasants had to pay a share of the crops produce and also had to pay a rent. During Asoka's reign at least two agricultural taxes were collected; a bhaga or the share (possibly 1/6<sup>th</sup> or 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the produce) and bali. The significant point that emerges from a perusal of *Arthashastra* and the Greek accounts is that the Mauryan administration probably levied taxes on both the agrarian and the non-agrarian sectors of the economy. The possibility of extracting revenue from animal breeders, forest dwellers, artisans and merchants can not be ruled out. The *Arthashastra* in fact lays down elaborate steps to gather information on the income, expenditure incurred by a family and proposes to estimate the amount of revenue to be derived from each household in an administrative/fiscal area. The *Arthashastra* further advises the ruler to impose extremely harsh revenue measures (*Pranaya*) in case the ruler faces a calamity or emergency. Under such a situation the ruler is recommended to demand high rate of taxes from agriculturists, breeders, artisans, and merchants. If

these harsh measures failed to replenish the treasury, the *Arthashastra* frankly advocates a number of dubious and fraudulent measures to fill up the royal treasury.

The Mauryas are to be credited for introducing a provincial system of administration for the first time in Indian history. Inscriptions of Asoka inform us about the existence of four provincial headquarters at Taxila, Ujjaini, Tosali, (near Bhubaneshwar) and Suvarangiri. There were at least four provincial headquarters in four cardinal directions; the administration of provinces was often entrusted to a prince of royal blood, labelled as *Kumara* and *Aryaputra*. Though both the terms denote royal princes the *Aryaputra* probably is synonymous with the *Aryakumara* in Panini's grammar which explains the term as the heir designate (*Yuvaraja*). The *Aryaputra*, therefore, was possibly of higher rank than an ordinary *Kumara*. *Aryaputra* is mentioned only in the context of Suvarangiri, the headquarters in the Southern sector. The appointment of an *Aryaputra* at Suvarnagiri was possibly due to the recognition of the importance of the Deccan which was rich in mineral resources viz. mines of gold and diamond. The perspective of four provincial headquarters in four cardinal directions probably presents too neat an administrative arrangement. There was indeed another *Kumara* named Samba, probably in charge of Manemadesa (in the central part of MP) as will be evident from an Asokan edict from Panguradiya. The presence of the fifth *Kumara* could signify the existence of more than four provincial divisions. The Kathiawad peninsula was certainly one such provincial division where the governor under Chandragupta was Vaisya Pushyagupta. The same area was governed by Yavanaraja Tushaspha during the reign of Asoka. Tushaspha was possibly of Iranian extraction. Thus in Kathiawad the Mauryas appointed persons outside the royal family – in fact even someone of Iranian origin – as provincial governors. The *Kumaras* though apparently of equal rank did not possibly enjoy equal powers. Two edicts of Asoka from Orissa give instructions that the provincial governor at Taxila and Ujjaiyini could send their own official on tours of inspection (*Anusamyana*) after every five years. The same type of tours were to be sent out from Tosali after every three years not by the *Kumaras* there but by the emperor himself. It would be therefore logical to infer that the provincial governor at Taxila and Ujjaiyini enjoyed more power than their counterpart in ancient Kalinga.

Provinces in the Maurya empire appear to have been further divided into districts which are called *Ahara* and *Janapada* in the Asokan edicts. Megasthenes enlightens us about a class of officers called *Agronomoi* who were in charge of the countryside. They were entrusted with the measurement of land, supervision of irrigation and administration of justice at local level. The Buddhist texts were aware of a type of officers who held the rope for the measurement of land (*Rajjuggahaka-amachcha*). Their function as a settlement officer corresponds to one of the functions of the *Agronomoi*, i.e. the measurement of land. Asoka employed a large number of *Rajjukas* over a vast multitude of dwellers in the countryside. The term *Rajjuka* may have some correspondence to *Rajjuggahaka-amachcha*. Asoka further assigned to them the local level administration of justice. The emperor explicitly expressed his trust on the *Rajjukas*: they were compared with expert nurses, attending to new born babies. In short the *Rajjuka* of Asoka's inscriptions may logically be compared with *Agronomoi* of the Greek accounts and therefore appear to have been an important officer at the district level. Kautiliya prescribes a different scheme of rural level administrative tier. At the top of the tier was the unit called *Sthaniya* consisting of 800 villages. Then came *Dronamukha* of 400 villages; further below stood *Karvatika* of 200 villages and at

the lowest level, the *Samgrahana* consisting of 10 villages. One is not sure if and whether this scheme of rural level administrative blocks in a descending order was ever applied in the Mauryan realm.

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## 24.5 ADMINISTRATION IN THE POST-MAURYAN PERIOD

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The collapse of the Maurya Empire in c. 187 BCE was followed by the emergence of several states and political powers in the sub-continent. Put differently, there was no single paramount political power. In Northern and Western India a few political powers like the Greeks, the Sakas and the Kushanas established their control by entering the sub-continent through the North Western Border land. A significant aspect of statecraft during this phase was the advent of the monarchical state in peninsular India for the first time. In Northern India, monarchy as a political institution continued uninterrupted, although not bereft of a few new features.

The growing power of the king himself is best illustrated by the use of several grandiose political epithets used by rulers. This was in sharp contrast to the rather simple title *Raja* used by the mighty Maurya emperor. Rulers of this period assumed high sounding titles like *Ekarat* (the sole ruler), *Rajadhiraja* (king of kings), *Sarvalogisvara* (lord of beings), *Mahisvara* (lord of the earth) etc.,. Bactrian Greek rulers for the first time introduced royal portraiture on their coins many of which were in circulation in North Western part of the sub-continent. The visual representation of the ruler on coins was intended to instil a sense of might and right of political authorities over their subjects. What is particularly noticeable is the performance of Vedic sacrifices (*Asvamedha*, *Vajapeya*, *Rajasuya*) by Pushyamitra Sunga and the Satavahana rulers of the Deccan. These Vedic sacrifices were performed to claim enhanced power and glory by a ruler. The distinction from the Maurya practice is once again obvious. As such sacrifices were conspicuous by their absence in the Maurya realm, by performing such Vedic sacrifices the ruler was considered to have been elevated to the position of the divinity and/or as equivalent to a God. The dignity claimed in this case is not based on the concept of divine position or descent of the ruler, but the elevation of the ruler to divine status by the virtue of his performance of sacred sacrifices on auspicious occasions. Some scholars would find in such claims by rulers the element of 'occasional divinity'.

A much stronger claim of the divinity of king is visible from the Kushana period onwards. The Kushana kings regularly used their dynastic epithet, son of God (*Devaputra*). This concept was possibly derived from the Chinese idea of considering the ruler as the son of heaven. An inscription introduces Kushana king Vasishka as a man-god (*Deva Manusha*). An almost parallel thought to this will be clearly evident from the dictum in the *Manusamhita* that even an infant king must not be disobeyed and disrespected, because he is truly a great divinity in human form. The Kushana coins regularly portray the Kushana emperor with a halo behind his head implying his supra-human and supra-mundane position. There were at least five dynastic sanctuaries (*Deva kula*) in the vast Kushana empire. In these *Devakulas* images of the deceased Kushana emperors and that of the reigning Kushana king as well were installed. The Kushana emperors visually projected themselves as venerable deities and established a cult of the emperor. This ideology of divine kingship and the deliberate creation of a political iconography contributed to elevation of the might and power of the Kushana emperor/



empire to enormous height. Since the Kushana empire included in it a vast multitude of different ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups, the cult of the emperor made the Kushana king as a cementing factor amidst immense diversities. This in other words helped the Kushanas to integrate an expansive empire.

The *Manusamhita* and the *Santiparva* of the *Mahabharata* also strongly uphold the concept that the foremost duty of the ruler was to render protection to his subjects and to maintain the ideal social order based on the *Varnasramadharmas*. These two texts also recognised that the king was entitled to collect taxes because he provided protection. In this concept may be seen the elements of the contractual theory of kingship or at least the notion of an agreement between the ruler and the ruled to render their respective duties and obligations.

As dynastic succession became increasingly regular, it further contributed to the strength of monarchy. In the Kushana empire, however, can be seen the practice of conjoint rulership comprising the reigning Kushana emperor as the senior ruler and his future heir as the junior co-ruler (e.g. Kanishka and Vashishka, Vashishka and Huvishka, Huvishka and Kanishka II and Huvishka and Vasudeva I). Whether such a system of conjoint rule precluded a struggle for succession cannot be ascertained.

The practice of assigning the bulk of the burden of administration to high ranking functionaries, like the *Amatya*, became quite regular during the period under review. The majority of the theoretical treatises viewed the *Amatya*, the *Mantrin* and the *Sachiva* as interchangeable and synonymous terms, meaning officers of very high rank including the minister. In the Buddhist Jatakas one comes across ministerial families (*Amachchakula*). Does this mean that the *Amatyas* could have been appointed on a hereditary basis and/or from handful number of families of high pedigree? Both the *Manusamhita* and the *Mahabharata* do favour the appointment of ministers from the two upper *Varnas*. The Saka ruler Rudradaman I (CE 150) had two important functionaries under him: *Karmasachiva* and *Matisachiva*. While the former certainly denoted executive officer, the later signified those who possessed intellect. The *matisachiva* being distinct from the *Karmasachiva*, appears to have offered counselling and therefore may be equated with the minister. Many *Amatayas* were also appointed in the core territory of the Satavahana realm in the *Western* and the *Central Deccan*.

The organisation of the army must have been brought under the supervision of the central administration. The four principle units of the army continued as before: infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephant forces. The commander in chief was usually known as the *Senapati*, an epithet Pushyamitra Sunga continued to bear even after he had overthrown the Maurya empire and established the Sunga rule. In the Kushana realm the commander of the army was known as the *Dandanayaka* (danda=army, nayaka=leader/captain). This period also recognised the importance of secret agents for the efficient management of affairs of the state. Spies were compared with the eyes of the ruler. But the theoretical texts of this period do not present the image of a systematic espionage network recommended by Kautilya.

The collection of revenue must have been one of the major concerns of administration especially the central administration. Revenue terms like *Bhaga*, (share of the produce), *Shulka* (tolls and customs) continued from the preceding period. Rudradaman I is said to have collected taxes according to the just (*Yatha*) and prescribed manner without

taking recourse to exploitative revenue policy. His treasury is said to have been overflowing with resources collected in an appropriate manner. During this period one encounters for the first time the regular practice of imposing a cess on salt production (*Lonakhadakam*). This system very frequently occurs in the Satavahana realm. Pliny (death CE 79) informs us that the levy on salt manufacture in the region of Mount Oromenus (the Salt Range in Pakistan) far exceeded the taxes levied by the ruler even from a diamond mine. Though the law books emphasise on the collection of appropriate and just taxes, the *Mahabharata* allows significant departure from this norm. The king should increase the burden of taxation slowly and in stages, like the wagon driver gradually piles upon the merchandise on his beast of burden. No less interesting is another recommendation: the king should imperceptibly draw out more and more resources from its subjects like a leech which sucks blood from a person in sleep without waking him up. That the ruler could on certain occasions exact forced labour (*Vishti*) and emergency taxes (*Pranaya*) is indicated by Junagarh inscription of Rudradaman, although the inscription actually eulogises the ruler for never having afflicted his subjects with these extortionate demands.

In Northern and Western India, the provincial administration was on several occasions entrusted to *Kshatrapas*. The origin of the system goes back to the days of the Achaeminid empire of Iran where Satraps were appointed to look after the provincial administration. Thus Sodasa, a prominent *Kshatrapa* governor was in charge of Mathura, Chastana and his grandson Rudradaman-I both were *Kshatrapas* in charge of Gujarat and Kathiawad and served their Kushana overlords till 150 CE. When Rudradaman assumed full independence (as a *Mahakshatrapa*) he appointed a provincial governor of the rank of an *Amatya* for Kathiawara region. Kanishka I had two governors at Varanasi named Kharapallana and Banasphara. One was a *Kshatrapa* and the other belonged to the rank of a military commander (*Dandanayaka*). This probably indicates that high ranking military officers in the Kushana empire could also be appointed as civil administrators.

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## 24.6 ADMINISTRATION FROM 300 TO 600 CE

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The major parts of these three centuries were dominated by two important monarchical powers, the Guptas in North India and the Vakatakas in the Northern and the Central parts of the Deccan. There were several other monarchical powers of lesser prominence in different parts of India. The polity of this period was pre-dominantly monarchical. The last remains of non-monarchical *Ganarajyas* can be seen in the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. In the early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE the Lichhvis definitely existed as a *Ganarajya* in the region of modern Vaishali; but it subsequently became a part of the Gupta realm and gradually was brought under a monarchical system. Among the powers that paid tribute to Samudragupta and obeyed his order were a few non-monarchical groups in Central India, Malwa and Rajasthan. Since the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE these non-monarchical groups are no longer visible in our sources. They eventually were incorporated in the Gupta empire and came under the fold of monarchical system.

North India was very much under the dominance of the Gupta rulers from c. 320 to about 500 CE. The central administration definitely revolved around the king. The exalted position of the Gupta emperor is clearly betrayed by the use of grand titles like *Maharajadhiraja*, *Parameshvara* and *Paramabhattacharaka*. The Vakataka King in

contrast to the Gupta king used a much simpler title, *Maharaja*. The portrait of the Gupta emperor on coins as slaying a lion or a tiger projected the image of a valorous and heroic ruler. There is a distinct tendency in the Gupta empire to stress the divinity of kings. Samudragupta was equated with Indra, Varuna, Yama and Kuvera. He was also eulogised as a deity residing in the earth and as an incomprehensible being (*achintyapurusha*). The Gupta rulers themselves being devout Vaishnavas often showed preference for the depiction of the boar (*Varaha*), the incarnation of Vishnu. As Vishnu in his boar incarnation rescued the earth, the Gupta ruler was visually projected as protector of his realm.

It is difficult to find any concrete information whether ministers (*Mantrin*) were appointed either in the Gupta or the Vakataka domains. Virasena Saba held the position of a *Sachiva* under Chandragupta II. As the term *Sachiva* was synonymous with *Mantri*, he could have served the Gupta emperor as a minister. Inscriptions of the Guptas and the Vakataka rulers clearly indicate a major proliferation of administrative posts. There were palace guards (*Pratihara*) who were headed by the *Maha-pratihara*. The officer named *Vinayasura* announced and escorted visitors to the ruler when the royal court was in session.

The prominent officer in the military department was *Dandanayaka* whom we have already mentioned before. In the Vakataka inscriptions one comes across a more or less similar position of the *Senapati*. A significant feature of military administration of this period was the tendency to introduce different grades in official hierarchy. The Vakataka inscription enumerates in an ascending order, the following positions *Dandanayaka*, *Mahadandanayaka*, *Sarva-dandanayaka* and *Maha-sarvadandanayaka*. Similarly, the *Maha-senapati* was placed above the *Senapati*. A general officer in the infantry, and cavalry units was known as *Bhata* and the officer looking after a unit of elephant forces was given the epithet of *Katuka*. A completely new administrative position appears from this period onwards. He is the *Sandhivigrahika*, the functionary in charge of peace (*Sandhi*) and war (*Vigraha*). It appears that he was assigned to what may be called the Department of External Affairs. Above the *Sandhivigrahika* there was, as expected, a very senior officer, the *Maha-sandhivigrahika*. Maintenance of law and order seems to have been assigned to the officer called *Danda-pasadhikarna* which denoted the chief of the police force (Basadh seals). Regular and irregular police forces were given the epithets of *Chata* and *Bhata*. Close to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE an administrative position was introduced in Western India to apprehend thieves (*Chauroddharanika*).

A remarkable feature of the administrative system of this period was the appointment of high ranking officers on a hereditary basis. Harishena, the composer of the Allahabad *Prasasti* was a *Maha-dandanayaka*, his father too had functioned in the same capacity. Virasena too was appointed to the post of *Sachiva* on hereditary consideration. While Chandragupta II had Sikharasvami as a *Kumaramatya*, his son Prithvishena served the next Gupta emperor Kumargupta I in the same position. No less significant is the practice to appoint the same person in different departments. Thus Harishena held the position of the officer in charge of war and peace, a senior military commander and possibly the officer in charge of the royal kitchen. Information regarding revenue collection and revenue administration is largely gleaned from contemporary inscriptions which offer an image of the increasing number of revenue terms. This may imply that the rulers extracted revenues from more sources than ever before. In addition to the traditional revenue terms like Share (*Bhaga*), enjoyment (*Bhoga*), tax in general (*Kara*),

tolls and customs (*Sulka*), many new revenue terms begin to appear in copper plate charters. Thus *Udranga* probably denoted a fixed tax on permanent tenants. Most of the taxes were possibly paid in kind and a similar portion could have been realised in cash (*Hiranya*). A copper plate of 592 CE from Kathiawad demonstrates that a cess was levied on the following professions: braziers, cloth makers, armour makers, dyers, weavers and shoe makers. The image of the increasing burden of taxes therefore can hardly be denied. If these belong to the category of customary taxes, the Vakataka records refer to diverse types of irregular and non-customary dues levied on bulls and cows, flowers, grass, hides and charcoal and taxes on fermenting of liquors and salt digging. The Vakataka inscriptions leave little room for doubt about the exaction of various types of forced labour (*Sarva vishti*). This was indeed an extra-economic form of coercion and was possibly exacted from blacksmiths, carpenters, barbers and potters and other similar professional groups. The period under review is marked by a high demand for various types of taxes though the Chinese Pilgrim Fa-Hsien (travelled in India 399 CE to 415 CE) spoke of very light burden of taxes. Fa-Hsien, obviously, did not provide an accurate picture in this regard.

The extensive Gupta and Vakataka kingdoms were divided into provinces which were designated either as *Bhukti* or *Desa*. The provincial governor was directly appointed by the Gupta emperor at whose feet the governor is said to have meditated. The expression implies his declared allegiance to the central authority. The provincial governor in charge of a bhukti was generally given the designation, *Uparika*. But from c. 475 CE onwards they came to be known as *Uparika Maharaja*, the suffix Maharaja certainly underlines the growing importance of the provincial governor during a phase when the Gupta central authority was waning.

Below the province stood the district known as *Vishaya* and *Ahara*. The district comprised of villages (*grama*) which were the lowest units of administration. However, there were several more tiers of administration between the district and village. These were variously known as the *Vithi*, the *Mandala*, the *Patta*, the *Pathaka* and the *Petha*. The officer in charge of the district was the *Vishayapati* who had his office at the district headquarters (*Vishayadhistanadhikarana*). The district office also maintained records of local land revenue and land transactions. The record keeper was known as the *Pustapala* while the *Kayastha* functioned as the official scribe. The most remarkable feature of the Gupta district and locality level administration was the incorporation of a few non-governmental persons in the local administration. They were the chief merchant of the city, the leader of the caravan traders, chief of the artisans, representatives of the well to do peasants and such like. None of them were salaried officials of the state but the Gupta administrative system accommodated their active presence in local administration. This was a new experiment in local administration never known to have been attempted before in Indian history.

Several scholars have put forth the opinion that the Gupta administrative system was more decentralised than the Mauryan administrative system. The decentralised nature of administration allowed for the active presence of non-governmental personages in local administration. This has been indicated as a marker of the gradual decay of the political control of the central authority. But the interpretation has been contested by others who have pointed out that the Gupta administration ably integrated the local elements in the district level administration. This is seen as further strengthening the fabric of the Gupta empire and helping it last for nearly two centuries and a half.

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## 24.7 ADMINISTRATION IN POST 600 CE

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A brief overview of the administrative system of the post-Gupta days may be presented here. The period, also called the early medieval phase in Indian history, was marked by the presence of many political powers. There was no single political master over the whole of North India. While this phase witnessed endemic clashes among many powers, these political powers were mostly local or regional powers. There is little trace of non-monarchical elements in the polity. The spread and proliferation of monarchical system has been explained by different scholars who have significantly contributed to the debate on the nature of the early medieval state. The multiplicity of powers is explained by many Marxist historians as an outcome of the disintegration of a centralised state system which gave way to a decentralised and fragmented polity. The parcellisation of the sovereignty of the apex political authority resulted in the emergence of many political pockets which came to be controlled by local and regional rulers who rose to prominence at the cost of a central and /or an apex political authority. The polity is often characterised as 'feudal', as opposed to the centralised system. This explanation has been strongly contested by many other scholars. Their principal point of explanation is that the proliferation of the powers suggests the unprecedented growth of monarchical polity which actually penetrated into areas that did not experience a territorial state polity before. There was no break down or crisis in administrative or political organisation.

Perhaps the most striking feature in the political organisation of this period was the emergence of the *Samantas*. The term *Samanta* in the *Arthashastra* stood for a neighbouring king, but its connotation changed significantly in the third century CE. The term began to denote a subordinate ruler or a vassal who served a suzerain. The *Samanta* had already appeared in some inscriptions of the Gupta period. The *Samanta* became a familiar and powerful element in the post-Gupta polity and figured regularly in both textual and epigraphic sources. The relationship between the *Samanta* and his overlord (*Sarvabhauma* or a ruler over many lands, *Sarvabhumi*) is an important facet of the post-Gupta polity. The *Samanta* system is also considered as the hallmark of the feudal polity in the Marxist historiography of early medieval India. It has been suggested that the period from c. 600 to 1200 CE experienced a major slump in commerce and circulation of coins. This seems to have created severe problems in ensuring the payment of salary in cash to the officers who therefore had to be paid in terms of land grants in lieu of cash. This kind of service grant gradually made the officer a master of the area granted to him. The service grant not only transferred revenue to the recipient but also transferred many administrative prerogatives to him. This is seen as a process of weakening of the central authority and the consequent rise of the *Samanta*. Literary texts often refer to vassals under the term *Rauta* (*Rajaputra*) and also speak of several ranks among the *Samantas*. The *Samantas* of a higher rank were known as *Mahasamanta* or *Mahasamantadhipatis*, distinct from minor *Samantas* (*Laghusamantas*). The sharp hierarchy in the rank of the *Samanta* is a significant feature of the system. The *Samantas* could have rendered valuable military assistance to the overlords during wars which were incessantly fought during this period. The *Ramacharitam* of Sandhyakaranandin portrays how the Pala ruler of Bengal had to plead the circle of his *Samantas* (*Samantachakra*) to provide help in his bid to recover the lost area of Varendri (north Bengal). The *Samantas* in this case had to be won over by lavish gift of land and other wealth. The account has been interpreted as

a marker of the growing importance of the *Samanta* feudatories at the expense of the central authority.

In Kashmir, as Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* bears it out, the ruler was reduced to a puppet as a result of the growing power of the vassals. The vassals in Kashmir were variously known as *Damara*, *Ekanga* and *Tantrin* who became the actual masters of the land. Kalhana lamented that because of the multiplicity of rulers (*Bhurirajake*) the entire administration (*Samastavyavahara*) actually succumbed to anarchy (*Arajaka*).

A large number of royal functionaries regularly appear in copper plate charters. Many of the positions continued from the Gupta period. The importance of the *Sandhivigrahika* seems to have increased during the early medieval times when warlike activities among formidable regional powers were virtually ceaseless. The tendency to appoint ministers on a hereditary basis or from a particular family became a well established practice during this period. Several generations of *Brahmana* ministers served the Pala rulers of Bengal and Bihar and had their importance recorded in Sanskrit *Prasastis*. The enormous increase in the issuance of landgrants seems to have brought two officers to greater prominence than the previous times. They were the messenger (*Duta*) and the scribe (*Kayastha/Karana*). The messenger often carried the royal order of granting landed property from the political centre to the actual area of property transfer. Princes of royal blood are known to have served in the capacity of a messenger. The *Kayastha* as the scribe was accorded considerable importance in an age when numerous landgrant charters were issued. As a literate person the *Kayastha* had access to official records, especially land revenue records. In course of time the *Kayastha* was often placed in the land revenue department. The rapacious nature of the *Kayastha* in the revenue department was not unknown. Kalhana viewed the *Kayastha* as dangerous as a snake.

Landgrants of this period are replete with revenue terms as these inscriptions often recorded remissions of revenue. Apart from the well established taxes like share (*Bhaga*), enjoyment (*Bhoga*), tax in general (*Kara*), tax in cash (*Hiranya*), tolls and customs (*Sulka*) and ferry dues (*Tara*), many new and non-customary levies were imposed. This definitely caused immense hardship to the common folk. In the landgrant the usual synonym for tax is 'affliction' (*Pida*). That involuntary labour was exacted by rulers will clearly be evident from the widespread practice of the imposition of forced labour (*Vishti*). Besides the regular taxes, all possible local resources were also levied, e.g. mango and mahua (*Amramadhuka*), jackfruit (*Panasa*), salt (*Lavana*), betel and coconut (*Guvaka-narikela*), fish and tortoise (*Matsya-kacchhapa*)

The earlier practice of dividing the realm into provincial units (*Bhukti*, *Desa*, etc.) continued in North India. The locality level administrative units were districts (*Vishaya*), circles (*Mandala*) and *Vithi*. The possibilities of participation of non- governmental personages in local administration—in vogue during the Gupta period—became remote during this period. On some occasions, however, the town councils in *Western* India and the Ganga-Yamuna doab area appeared to have accommodated locally important people. These were often called *Panchakulas*, literally a committee of five members.

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## 24.8 SUMMARY

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This Unit discusses the administrative and institutional system in North India, during the 'early historical' and 'early medieval period'. The political formation of the Vedic period

is generally regarded as a pre-state or proto-state polity. With the emergence of the janapadas the monarchical and oligarchical pattern came into existence. The establishment of Mauryan empire heralded the era of large monarchical states with elaborate administrative machinery. In the post-Mauryan period especially during the Kushana period the notion of divine kingship became prevalent. In the period between 300-600 CE the Guptas and the Vakatakas dominated the political scene. Their administrative system is categorised as decentralised by many scholars. The polity of this period was predominantly monarchical. The *Samanta* system is regarded as the hallmark of Post 600 CE political formation.

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## 24.9 EXERCISES

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- 1) Discuss the salient features of administrative system under the Mauryas.
- 2) Give an account of the administrative system in the post-Gupta period.



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