

# An Overview of Ancient Indian Governance

**Sudeshna Basu**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Sanskrit  
**Sammilani Mahavidyalaya**

## ABSTRACT

The picture of ancient Indian political system can be obtained from the scriptures like Daṇḍanīti, Arthaśāstra, Śukranītisāra and to some extent from the two great epics the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Though the form of state in the early vedic period was tribal, subsequently the chaotic condition of the tribal state resolved. Thereafter the most common form of Government coming into later development became monarchical. The ancient Indian scholars namely Manu, Kauṭilya and Śukra recommended the theoretical and practical principles required for smooth running of the ancient Government. The ancient state had seven constituents, called Saptāṅga namely Svāmin, Amātyas, Janapada, Durgas, Koṣa, Daṇḍa and Mitra tathā Nīti which were organized as a whole in order to promote social, political and economical development of the state. The king used to be usually guided by his council of ministers. The only purpose of the king was the welfare of his subjects without any personal gain. In the monarchical state democracy public liberty prevailed in the local Government like village, panchayat, trade council etc.

### Keywords:

1. Kauṭilya
2. Śukranītisāra
3. Mudrārākṣasa
4. Caṇankya
5. Governance
6. Dūta

### **An overview of Ancient Indian Governance**

The nature and form of political Governance prevalent in ancient India can be visualised from the Scriptures like Daṇḍanīti, Arthaśātra and Śukranītisāra, the authors of which are Manu, Kauṭilya and Śukra respectively albeit R.G. Veda is the prime source of knowledge of the subject concerned. In Manu 'Daṇḍa' represents the king, the leader in Arthaśātra of Kauṭilya economics and Governmental principles, relating to territory are dealt with; while Śukranīti shows the science of wisdom and right course.

The concept of ancient state or Rājya is based on the composition of seven limbs or Saptāṅga namely of Svāmin (king), Amātyas (ministers), Janapada (territory and the people), Durgas (Forts), Koṣa (Treasury) Daṇḍa (the Army) Mitra tathā Nīti (Allies and inter state relation), the proper coordination of which can cause all around development of the state. The king's goal is welfare of his subjects for which he is to utilize treasury without misappropriating any part of it. Use of public fund by the Svāmin for personal cause is to be treated as a vice. Kauṭilya, Manu and Śukra have laid stress on the role of Amātyas as advisors of the king in the state administration. In Mudrārākṣasa of the playwright Viśākhadatta the Prime Minister has sometimes played a more effective role than the king. However the Ṛgveda and Atharvaveda have not recognized the role of ministers. As to the number of Ministers, Manu was in favour of 8 Ministers, Śukranīti advocated for 10 numbers,

the Mānava school for 12 numbers, Bārhaspati school for 16 and the Ausanāsa school for 20 ministers. But Kauṭilya did not insist of the definite number of ministers. The functions of the Ministers included framing of fresh policies budget, tax-laws, defence rules, external affairs, security maintenance of law and order and so on. The form of state in ancient India was chiefly monarchical but the king and his subjects equally obeyed 'Dharmas' which comprised the code of duties.

The Mahābhārata is a reliable source from which we can learn about the earlier Indian Science of polity especially its Śāntiparva gives an account of the duties of the king and the Government. Most of the scholars except Kauṭilya and Śukra averred on the theoretical principles of ancient Indian polity. In the post Kauṭilyan era no other writer could give as clear a picture of practical aspects of the science of polity, as Śukra could. In 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Śukra explained what the portfolios of the ministry would be. According to Śukra 10 ministers would hold 10 portfolios such as (1) Purohita (2) Pratinidhi (3) Pradhāna (4) Sachiva (5) Mantriṇ (6) Prāḍvivāka (7) Paṇḍita (8) Sumantra (9) Amātya (10) Dūta.

Purohita functioned as a preceptor of the king. He had to perform Purohita Karmas as advised in the Atharvaveda for the purpose of king's success and security of his kingdom. Besides the council of ministers the Purohita sometimes had to do administrative jobs also. But from 200 AD onwards there was a decline in the power and position of the Purohita. 'Pratinidhi' the second minister had to represent the king during the king's illness or his tour. According to Śukraniti 'Pradhāna' had job of keeping vigil on the whole administration. 'Sachiva' was the war minister. 'Mantriṇ' superintended the foreign ministry. 'Prāḍvivāka' was the judicial minister who was revered as chief justice. 'Paṇḍita' the minister being well-versed in Dharmaśāstra helped the administration in framing socio-religious policies. The department of treasury was handled by 'Sumantra' who had to see the accounts and collect taxes. Amātya was the Revenue Minister whose duty was to prepare a list of villages, towns, mines and forests in the whole kingdom and to determine the amount of expected income from those places. 'Dūta' was the last portfolio that was held by the person who worked as Messenger or Ambassador carrying king's errands to foreign countries. This system of ancient ministry finds its reflection in the modern Republican Government also. According to Manu the king ought to consult with the ministers both jointly and separately for effective and smooth discharge of duties. But Kauṭilya was in favour of joint consultation only.

In the matter of recruitment of ministers there were divergent views. One view was to select ministers considering mainly the expertise of the individual. Another view was to look for allegiance of the candidate. Kauṭilya opined that an ideal minister should come of a noble family and should be wise, foresighted and possess strong memory. Selection of ministers should be made seeking a good number of ideal qualities such as intelligence, skill, eagerness, fearlessness, humanity, loyalty, rectitude and physical fitness. Manu and Kauṭilya lay emphasis on minimum qualities of ministers Smrtis and the Nītis recommended for selection of ministers from the descendants or relations of a minister. The Smrtis gave preference for appointment from the Brāhmanas. Śukra was against this cast preference. However in the Mahābhārata, ministry shows selection from various castes. But the ancient monarchs mostly preferred appointment of brāhmana ministers.

There being no central Assembly in the ancient political system the appointment of ministers was to be done by the king himself on whose discretion on the prospect of the appointed ministers depended. The ministers had to discharge duties whole heartedly for common welfare and advise the king properly. Kāmaṇḍaka was of the opinion that the minister should be the friend and guide of the king. The role of the state by a resolute, self confident and wise king would be called Rājayatta (created by king). On the contrary in case of a whimsical and feeble-minded king, the administration controlled by the unscrupulous ministers was called Sachivāyattantra. When both the king and the ministers maintained balance of power, it was called Ubhāyatta. In Mudrārākṣasa king Candragupta was influenced and guided by Cāṇakya a very skillful minister. Selection of secretarial officers in the Government was done from among the experienced persons of tested ability since good governance depended on their ability. The Secretariate officers had to draft precise and flowless communicate and get it endorsed by the king for circulation. They had to preserve carefully all papers, documents and written orders especially relating to transaction in land, grants etc. The ancient polity shows evidence of decentralized administration maintaining hierarchy of the secretariate, provincial, district and local administration. The king used to pay annual visit to the towns and villages for assessing the implementation of his policies. Manu and Śukra had their recommendations about this tour.

In the ancient polity spy system played a useful role in the administration. According to Kauṭilya the spies in disguise as hermits, students and tradesmen had to gather genuine news from different places, report on the activities of the office and non office personnel. The nuns and the astrologers were usually recruited as spies.

Direction of duty or submission of false report by the spies were punishable. The higher officials were engaged as special messengers. Various department under Government were supervised by 'Adhyakṣas' 'Karmasachivas' or 'Kancukīṇ' who were all officials of higher rank.

The department of Military was given top most priority for which nearly 50% of revenue earned was spent. Different branches of Military namely cavalry, infantry, chariots, elephant, transport etc. were headed by 'Senāpati', 'Mahāsenāpati', 'Mahābalādhikarta' since these titles were used in different administration. Officers in charge of Infantry, Cavalry, elephant were called 'Pattadhayakṣha', Aśvapti and Hastyadhakṣa respectively. The Army was also accompanied by doctors, nurses, ambulance personnel and sometimes veterinary doctors. There was External Affairs department also which was headed by 'Mahāsandhivigrahika'. This department coordinated with detective department. The Military was very strong and powerful. An illustration will make it clear. One Pādika would command 200 infantry, 10 elephants, 10 chariots and 50 horsemen. A Senāpati would command 10 Padātikas and Nāyaka 10 Senāpatīs. The military commanders were called Durgapalas. Similarly the Forantiers were controlled by Antapatas. The aforesaid strength of military was found in the Mauryan Administration. In the Mauryan administration the higher department of administration consisted of Mantriṇs, Sannidhātā and Samāhartā. The efficient Amātyas were chosen as Mantriṇs. The job of Samaharta was to collect revenue from towns, provinces, mines, forests, trade-routes etc. Sannidhātā did the job of constructing treasury and warehouse. He was custodian of procured revenue. Adhyakṣas mostly did economic function. The management was so planned that even the king's family was to be looked after by the controller. The controller has to be alert to the likely hazard of poisoning in the kitchen in the palace, also to see the maintenance of royal garden, furniture and decorations. Moreover the public health and hygiene was also given utmost priority. The drainage system was effectively maintained by providing a dunghill and an outlet for sewage in every house. Throwing of garbage and carcose on open road, adulteration of food items and medicines were subject to punishment. The state was cautious against any outbreak of epidemic and stood beside the people in the event of natured calamities. The incidents of moral degradation of the people were not even spared from strict vigil of the state.

As regards trade and commerce industries, Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra speaks about overall control of the state. Production of gold, pearl, cotton, salt, fish, wine and forest goods were all under the control, management and supervision of the state. Private industries had private control. Sometimes goldsmiths were given permission to manufacture golden and silver ornaments. Sometimes coins were also manufactured for the purpose of trade under strict supervision of office known as Suvaraṇadhakṣa.

Now we shall discuss the legal or judicial system as existed in ancient India. According to Arthaśāstra Nītiśāstra and Dharmaśāstra the old legal system was well planned and organized. Usually the king would hear the serious complaints in the royal court and deliver judgment. Other cases were handled by the chief justice or the king's officers. There were provincial courts consisting of three, or five or seven judges. But in Mauryan legal system the court consisted of three judges and three officers. The honesty of the judges was not kept beyond question. Kauṭilya stressed on even moral assessment of the judges to be done by agents provocateurs. Viṣṇu Smṛti went for to the extent of giving punishment to the delinquent judges by punishment and forfeiture of property. The cognizable offence were adjudicated by the special court such as sex crimes, robbery, murder etc. known as Kaṇṭakaśodhana. Types of punishment given was fines, mutilation, amputation and even death sentence. The civil courts were called Dharmastnīyas that handled the cases of sales, gifts, contracts, agreements, marriages etc.

The legal system in the Mauryan administration was solely guided by the principles laid down in Arthaśāstra that administrative system is evidently seen in the drama 'Mudrārākṣasa'. In the Mauryan era the king or monarch was seldom elected. Rather succession of the eldest son of the king to the throne was a custom. After succession the new king had to learn the traditional culture as contained in the vedic lore 'Trayī'. In the opinion of Kauṭilya the king must learn economics (Vārtā) and the science of Government (Daṇḍanīti). He should have training from the experienced statesman on the requisite affairs administration. In the Mauryan administration the king had to oversee all the administrative jobs in consultation with his council of ministers. But on the gravest occasions, the king was free to ignore the guideline of his ministers only for the farewell of his subjects

if he deemed so. In that case he could give command or issue proclamation issue order forbidding killing of animal or change of administrative machinery. But in no case he would be a despotic king.

The ancient Indian state and its administration mostly grew and developed in the vedic age and the Mauryan era. We can clearly visualize in the two great epic the Ramāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata and other ancient scriptures how the state made an allround development catering to the diverse needs of the people depending on a well organized polity. Various welfare activities like making good coordination between employer and employee payment of stipulated wage to employees, punishment for negligence in job, seeing the interest of consumers, laying out roads, ensuring traffic safety, taking care of the distressed, aged and infirm people, looking after the orphans and poor women and soon, and mark the ancient state as a welfare state.

The science of polity that developed in ancient India made the state powerful not at the cost of democratic spirit and individual liberty of the people at large. The existence of the Social Institutions like Brāhmana or Śramana Assemblies and the trade guides prove that a democratic atmosphere prevailed in the state where the ministers could implement the policies in coordination with these social institutions which ensured indirect involvement of the common people. Again, the Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries though given financial aid from the state, could grow develop with their own beliefs and moto without the state hindrance. The growth of village panchayat, city councils and other various local bodies in the ancient state clearly shows the devolution of power and the same habits reflection in the modern political system. Thus the modern science of polity greatly our to the ancient political system with all its diversity.

### Bibliography:

- Bandyopadhyay, Manabendu, (ed.), Kauṭilyam, Arthaśāstram, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Kolkata, Fourth edition, 2010
- Basak Radhagobindo, (ed.), The Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya (Vol. I), General Printers and Publishers Private Limited, Calcutta 1964.
- Bhattacharjee, S.N., Administration of Law and Justice in India, The University of Burdwan, 1982.
- Kangle R.P., (ed.), The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra Part II, Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, Second Edition, 1972.
- Siddhantavagīsa Haridāsa, (ed.), Mahābhāratam, Kolkata, 1361 (Vangabda).
- Sen, Satyendra, (ed.), Manuṣaṅhita, Chattapadhyaya Brothers, Calcutta, Fourth Edition, 1959.