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# A Critical Review of Gupta Administration and Its Key Role in Sustaining a Unified Empire

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**Abstract:** *The administrative system of the Gupta dynasty was a complex set up that reflect a more decentralize and quasi-feudal nature which was quite different from the centralized Mauryan Empire. The statecraft of the Empire was based on the Nitisara of Kamandakiya. The Saptanga theory was in the core of the administrative functioning. The king was the highest authority followed by the Princes, the ministers and other bureaucratic high ranking official (sometime working as undercover agents). The kingdom is divided into various provinces and vassal state which were directly under the control of the king and sometimes were indirectly controlled through vassal lord. The network of spies and the village Pancha-mandali system has a significant role in keeping the administrative functioning efficient. Thus, the Gupta empire flourished for many years because the of efficient administrative system that allowed changes and continuity of rules according to the need of the time.*

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**Keywords:** Gupta Administration, Revenue, Ministers, Bureaucrats, Feudatories, Provinces, Decentralization

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## Introduction

The vast Gupta Empire was ruled by successive Gupta kings till its decline and disintegration after *Skandagupta* (presume to be last powerful king to have kept the empire intact). The Gupta empire was built not only by conquest and war but also by non-violent diplomatic means such as matrimonial alliances and voluntary submission of smaller kingdom to be a part of the Empire in exchange for certain level of autonomy. The ruler of subdued kingdom was given title and epithets suitable to their importance and role. The political hierarchies within the Empire's administration were common. Upinder Singh had rightly suggested that 'from c.300 onwards, political hierarchies can be identified by the titles of rulers which reflect relations of paramountcy and subordination'(Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, 2009, p. 485). The king is considered the highest authority in the governance of the Gupta kingdom. The theory of divine origin of king is explicitly favoured<sup>1</sup> (Dutt, 1896, p. 4). Hence the Gupta kings adopted pompous titles such as *Parameshvara*,

*Maharajadhiraja* and *Paramabhattacharaka* (Sharma, 2005, p. 237)(Fleet, 1960, pp. 17, 161, 171, 183, 185, 186, 212, 217 etc). The *Kamandaka Nitisara* is one of the sources of information for this period (Dikshitar, 1952, p. 108). The state consisted of seven limbs (*Saptanga Theory*), which are the King, The ministers, Kingdom, Castle (Fortress), treasury, army and allies (Dutt, 1896, p. 5). The paper is attempting to construct the *Guptan* administrative units, loosely based upon modern concept and principle of statecraft i.e. legislative, executives, judicial and the army or policing. Although it was not as well define as the present Indian administrative structure. The Gupta administrative structure have certain similarities that it become easier for us to understand it by using the modern political administrative divisions. The legislative unit of the Gupta administration broadly consisted of the King and Minister who make laws and give council to the king and executive are the officer who implement them. The King with the help of judicial officer does the role of maintaining the law and order. They are responsible to keep the law of the land functioning. The army does the work of policing and protecting the kingdom from external and internal aggressions.

The Gupta empire given the huge size and comprising of various ethnic groups, speaking different language and following different culture and religion, Upinder Singh has rightly observed that 'the Gupta empire as the epicentre of a complex web of varied political relationships'(Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, 2009, p. 477). Therefore, in order to keep the empire under control, the Gupta's formulated an effective administrative structure which was undoubtedly based on the *Mauryan* administrative structure but many other new systems of administration were added to suit the functioning of these complex empire. The *Mauryan* state was based on the *Arthashastra* of *Kautilya* and the Gupta is based on the *Nitisara* of *Kamandakiya*, which no doubt retain continuity, incorporating change and supplements the *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (Gautam, 2019, p. 15).

The main difference between The Gupta's and the *Mauryas* administrative structure was that the empire was more decentralize in the Gupta compared to the *Mauryan* empire. Upinder Singh has correctly suggested that 'While the *Arthashastra* reflects a model of an arrogant, absolutist state, the *Nitisara* represents a later, less exultant reflection on political power, one in which non-violence has significantly tempered the discussion of violence, especially with regards to punishment, the royal hunt and war' (Singh, Political Violence in Ancient India, 2017, p. 29). Thereby, The Gupta empire can be safely postulated to have certain aspect of feudalism or quasi feudal in nature but not the same as the European feudal system (Basham, 1954 reprint 2004). Therefore, the administration of the *Gupta's* can be understood better by dividing the empire into two types, one that was directly under the control of the king (central administration) and other type was of small kingdoms that was under the suzerainty of the king but granted autonomy and was ruled directly by the vassal lords or subjugated kings (provincial or feudatories administration). R.S Sharma had opined that 'The central region of the empire i.e. north Bengal, Bihar, UP and some adjoining areas of were directly ruled by officer appointed by the king. The provinces and vassals state offered

homage to the sovereign by personal attendance at his court, paid tribute to him, and presented to him daughters and in return they were granted certain autonomy to administer it (Sharma, 2005, p. 239).

## Central Administration

Central Administration of the Gupta had direct control of the province, district, cities and town through an appointed officer of the king. The king was the head of the kingdom. He is assisted by his council of minister (*Mantri Mandala* (Dikshitar, 1952, p. 140)) and cabinet or *Mantrabijam* (Dikshitar, 1952, p. 143). The province was known as *Deshas* or *Bhuktis*. The province was administered by governors who were usually designated as *Uparikas*. The provinces were divided into districts known as *Vishyas*. It was administered by officers known as *Vishayapatis*. The *Uparika* and *Vishayapati* were assisted in the administrative duties by certain prominent member of the guild of a town. Upinder Singh has summarized about 'the Administrative units below district level included clusters of settlements known variously as *Vithi*, *Patta*, *Bhumi*, *Pathaka*, and *Petha*. There are references to officials known as *Ayuktakas* and *Vithi-Mahattaras*. At village level, villagers chose functionaries such as the *Gramika* and *Gramadhyaksha*, and village elders also had an important role to play in various matters. The *Damodarpur* copper plate of the reign of Budhagupta (of Gupta year 163) mentioned as *Ashtakula-Adhikarana* (a board of eight members) headed by the *Mahattara*. *Mahattara* has a range of meaning including village elder, village headman, and head of family or community. The *Sanchi* inscription of the time of Chandragupta II mentions the *Pancha-mandali*, which may have been a corporate village body' (Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, 2009, pp. 487-488). The *Pancha-mandali* has been interpreted by various historian as a ancient *Panchayat* system, which reflect the role of local-self-governing administrative departments and functionaries.

## Provincial Administration

It is important to highlight at the cost of repetitiveness that the provincial organisations under the Gupta were of two kinds, one which was directly under the control and another which were not directly administer by the officers appointed by the Gupta kings. Hinting not only an indirect and but a nominal control over the latter types of Provinces. Therefore, there is a possibility that the administrative officer was not only appointed by king but also by the feudal lords according to the convenience and needs of the situation and time. Thereby, these administrative officers or the bureaucrats of these autonomous state, do not always directly answer to the king but to the feudal vassals. Such autonomous provinces in the word of Dikshitar, was largely a replica of system of government at centre. Thus, provincial administrative unit have the similar set up in conformity with the central administrative system. These provinces were mostly in the periphery of the kingdom or they were situated at the border of the empire. To name some it, for the better understanding, they are the *Parivrajakas*, the *Uchchakalpas* and *Mandasor*. Furthermore, he had concluded that 'the autonomy enjoyed by a feudatory state appears to have varied with its size, geographical position and the

financial resources'(Dikshitar, 1952, p. 239). The name ascribe to feudal vassals by the Gupta Emperors were known as *Nrpa Nrpati*, *Parthiva*, *Maharaja* and *Mahasamantas* (for big and important feudal's)(Fleet, 1960, pp. 79-88).

### **Minister and High-Ranking Bureaucrats and Their Role**

The empire was administered by various departments headed by high ranking executive official such as *Amatyas*, *Sachivas* and *Kumaramatyas*. Some names of the important ranking official are as follows; *Mantri Mukhya* (prime minister, who presided the cabinet deliberation in absence of the king)(Dikshitar, 1952, p. 141), *Mahasandhivigrahika* or *Sandhivigrahika* (minister of war and peace), *Mahadandanayakas* or *Dandanayakas* (judicial or military officers), *Mahabaladhikrita* or *Baladhikrita* (commander-in-chief), *Bhatashvapati* (commander of infantry and cavalry), *Ranabhandagaradhikarana* (office of the military storehouse), *Mahapratihara* (chief of the palace guards), *Khadyatapakita* (superintendent of the royal kitchen), *Ayuktakas* also known's as *Vishyapati* or *Bhandaka* (another cadre of high ranking officer similar with the *Yuktas* of the Ashokan inscription and *Arthashastra*, who were head of the district administration), *Vinayashitisthapaka* (one who maintains moral and social discipline), *Dutakas*<sup>2</sup> (spies). The above mention officer is the summary of the description of Upinder Singh in her book (Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, 2009, p. 488). *Corarajju* (police officer responsible for watching the movement of the robbers and bringing them to book)(Dikshitar, 1952, p. 173).

The various names and ranks confirm the functioning of various important department under the Gupta rule. There was certainly a central assembly, which is called *Sabha* and the royal council or the cabinet; which were also called the *Mantri Mandala* (Dikshitar, 1952, pp. 139-140) (Dutt, 1896, p. 192). This is the political unit which is directly involve in law making and implementation of it throughout the empire. There were revenue department which connect almost all the provincial and central administrative unit and was responsible for collecting various taxes in cash and kinds. It also has many executive official for the efficient work of the revenue department of the kingdom. The Law department look after the law and order of the kingdom. They are responsible for criminal and civil cases. They settle disputes and punish the law breaker according to the Law of the Land.

Thus, the law department is an important unit of the administration that keep the empire safe from chaos and also to checked the bureaucrats from going astray from its normal duties and also to make them abide by the ethical code of conduct that comes along with the responsibility. There were military and police department that look after the law and order and were also use in the defence of the empire and also in conquest efforts for expanding the empire of the *Vijigisu*. There were various other department such as the mining, minting, education, account and audit, etc., The minting of coins was a state monopoly. The feudatories or frontier kingdom under the suzerainty of the Gupta do not have the right to mint coins or have different currency of their own without the consent of the centre.

## The District Administration

The district administration was headed by Vishayapati or district Magistrate. Dikshitar infers that 'Three or four district forms a province in the Gupta period' (Dikshitar, 1952, p. 255). Further he refers to '*Adhistanas* as the District Headquarters and *Visaya Adhikarana* as office of the district officer. The district Mayor was assisted by non-official (*Nagarasresthi*<sup>3</sup>, *Sarthavaha*<sup>4</sup>, *Prathamakulika*<sup>5</sup>, and *Prathamakayastha*<sup>6</sup>) and official in charge of a department (*Saulkika*<sup>7</sup>, *Agraharikas*<sup>8</sup>, *Gaulmika*<sup>9</sup>, *Dhruvadhikaranika*<sup>10</sup>, *Bhanda Karadhikrta*<sup>11</sup>, *Utkhetayita*<sup>12</sup>, *Talavataka*<sup>13</sup>), which were under the control of the district magistrate. The Non-official were advisory board but probable they were very influential in the decision-making process of executive board.

## The Urban Administration

There were many urban units which can be term as city's or municipal town's highest office called the *Adhistanadhikarana*. Among the important cities in the Gupta empire, Dikshitar had mentioned of cities like Patliputra, Ayodhya, Ujjain, Dasapura, Girinagara etc (Dikshitar, 1952, p. 265). Since the provincial administration was of two types; One is which under the directly under the control of the centre and other under the control of the subsidiary king or the sub-feudatories. Thus, we took the liberty to infer that the city administration also was of two types: which replicate the provincial administration. However, the city administrative set up are always identical with the centre. Dikshitar has further pointed out that 'a good measure of local autonomy was enjoyed by these urban units their administration was controlled by the Central Government through an officer called the *Pura-pala Uparika*. The cities were headed by the *Puroga* also called *Purara-pala* or *Nagara-Raksaka* (city mayor), assisted by other bureaucrats. The city council under the leadership of the mayor and the guilds are believed to have played a major role in keeping the city peaceful, prosperous and vibrant.

## The Village Administration

The village administration was headed by *Gramika* with the helped of a body of local officer and an assembly of villagers. Some other official found mention on various epigraphical record of the Gupta period are *Astakuladhikarana*<sup>14</sup>, *Mahattaras*<sup>15</sup>, *Talavatala*<sup>16</sup>, *Valat Kausan*<sup>17</sup>, *Astapatalika*<sup>18</sup>, *Simakarmakara*<sup>19</sup> etc. The village administration which is the lowest unit of administration appears to enjoy considerable amount of autonomy. The *Pancha-mandali* can be inferred as an ancient *Panchayat* system.

## Conclusion

The Gupta administration was head by the king. He was assisted by his council of minister which consisted of feudatories' representatives and highly educated and think tank famously known as Amatyas (ministers). The central administration was divided into provinces and the provinces were sub-divided into sub-division, district and village unit. The city and towns were also administered by the centre or the feudatories. The feudatory's administrative system was a replica of the central

administrative system. This administrative set up function through a chain of well-trained bureaucrats, Prince and Minister, who were appointed directly by the King or the Feudal Lords. The bureaucrats were well educated personnel with exceptional skills and knowledge in the field that they were hired. The spies' network is significant because they must have been the intelligent unit (like the I.B or C.I.D or RAW department of today that give the country the intelligence service to tackle national and international security issues) that informs the king of any matter related to the state or the empire. The Gupta kings greatly depended on this bureaucrat or the executive official for the well-being, security and prosperity of the empire. The state recognised the importance of having strong bureaucrats that head all the administrative unit in the centre, province, district and village levels. Thereby, the Gupta administration become efficient which ultimately result into a strong imperial power of the time in Indian sub-continent which was able to withstand and flourished for more than 200 years in spite of foreign aggression of the Sakas and the Hunas.

## Notes

1. *A righteous king, protecting his subjects to the best of his resources and having the power of capturing hostile cities, should be held in as high a regard as the lord Prajapati himself. Book I. 11 Kamandakiya nitisara.*
2. *The Dutas are also known as ambassadors(Dikshitar 1952).*
3. *The president of the Chamber of commerce.*
4. *The representative of the Merchant of guild/s.*
5. *The chief of the guild of Artisans.*
6. *The chief scribe or writer in the administrative office and probably the chief Secretary of the administrative Board.*
7. *Superintendent of toll s or customs.*
8. *Officer in special charge of Agraharas.*
9. *Superintendent of forest and woods.*
10. *Superintendent of the collection of the royal share of the produce in grain.*
11. *Officer in charge of treasury.*
12. *Collector of taxes.*
13. *Village accountant.*
14. *A board of eight member (Singh 2009: 487).*

15. *Village elders, village headman, head of a family or community*
16. *The office of the village accountant (Fleet, 1960: 217).*
17. *A land revenue official.*
18. *Account officer or custodian of legal documents (Dikshitar 1952: 276).*
19. *Official in charge of the maintenance of the boundary of villages.*

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