

Administration System of the Mauryan empire (c. 325 – 185 BC)

- The Mauryas not only built a vast empire, covering practically in the entire sub-continent and extending beyond it in the north-west, but also integrated it by adopting a suitable administrative system.
- The administrative set-up established by Chandragupta Maurya (c. 325 – 300 BC), the founder of the Mauryan dynasty, continued under his successors and no change was felt necessary except that Ashoka tried to liberalise it further and elaborated the public duties of the state officials. The basic principles of Mauryan administration remained the same till the weaker Mauryas lost their hold over the administration.
- Three major sources viz., Kautilya's Arthashastra, Megasthenes' Indica and Ashokan inscriptions provide necessary information on Mauryan administration.
- On the basis of the Arthashastra and the Indica many scholars put forwarded the idea of a highly centralised and uniform structure of Mauryan administration. This idea was prevailed for a long time but now scholars like Romila Thapar, Gerard Fussman have modified this view.
- In general Mauryan state was a monarchy with a powerful king at the centre of the political system. The Mauryan kings were guided by the Council of Ministers and followed the advice of the Arthashastra. They regarded the welfare and interests of their subjects more important than their own interests (Yoga-khema). Ashoka declared in one of his inscriptions that all his subjects were like his children and he was most anxious to promote their spiritual and temporal well-being. It indicates that the idea of paternal kingship became popular during the reign of Ashoka.
- According to Arthashastra, next to the king, *Amatya* played a vital role in the Mauryan administration. This umbrella term *Amatya* included all high ranking officials, counsellors and executive heads of department.
- Arthashastra mentions two consultative bodies, one small body of *Mantrins* called the "Mantra-Parishad", the other large body of variable number called the "Mantri-Parishad", which included executive heads of department.
- Apart from the king and his consultative bodies, there were a number of high officers in charge of important portfolios such as the "Samahartri" – chief collector of revenue, who was in charge of maintain accounts; "Sannidhatri" – treasurer, also in charge of the royal stores; "Dauvarika" – chief of the palace attendants; "Antaravamshika" – chief of the palace guard etc.
- Ashoka's inscriptions mention many kinds of *Mahamatras* or high officers such as the "Anta-mahamatras" – in charge of frontier areas; "Itthijakka-mahamatras" – in charge of women's welfare; "Dhamma-mahamatras" – in charge of Law and Piety etc.
- The Mauryas had a large, efficient and well equipped standing army which was maintained by the state. According to Arthashastra, the Mauryan army was divided into four divisions – infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots. The king held the supreme command of the army and he was the highest militant officer.

- The army administration was closely connected with the espionage system. Ashoka's inscriptions refer to the "Prativedakas" and "Pulisani", who were responsible for keeping the king informed of public opinion. Arhashastra also refers to the spies called "Sanstha", who were positioned in one place, and " Sanchara ", who roamed about.
- The Mauryas had to organise a well set-up finance administration to maintain a large army and numerous high ranked officials in the state. Kautilya visualized extensive state participation, regulation and control over the economy. Therefore, Bangard Levin argued that ' the Mauryas exercised strict control over the activities of all units of taxation system and implemented in practice many of the principles elaborated by Kautilya in his treatises on polity.'
- The most remarkable aspect of the Mauryan administration is its provincial administration. Ashoka's inscriptions suggest that the Maurya empire was divided into provinces under governors. There seem to have been at least four provinces – a southern one with its centre at **Suvarnagiri**, a northern one with its headquarter at **Taxila**, a western one with its headquarter at **Ujjaini** and an eastern one with its centre at **Tosali**. The Mauryas appointed royal princes or member of the royal family as a governor of these provinces. There could have been a fifth unit of regional level administration in Kathiawad where we find Pushyagupta and Iranian Tushaspha were acting as a governor during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka respectively (Junagarh rock inscription of Rudradaman I, 150 AD). Both governors were outsiders to the royal house.
- The large provinces were divided into fairly extensive districts and these administrative divisions are referred to as "**Ahara**" and "**Janapada**" in Ashokan inscriptions. Ashokan inscriptions suggest that the "Pradeshika", "Rajuka" and "Yukta" were important officers at the district level.
- Arhashastra suggests an elaborate administrative structure. In his discussion of the countryside, Kautilya recommends that the king should establish headquarters known as a "**Sthaniya**" to administer a unit consisting of 800 villages, a "**Dronamukha**" in a unit of 400 villages, a "**Karvatika**" in a unit of 200 villages and a "**Sangrahana**" in a unit of 10 villages. Sthanikas and Gopas were in charge of these administrative units. The village was the smallest unit of local administration.
- Megasthenes gives an elaborate description of the municipal administration of the famous city Pataliputra. According to him, Pataliputra was controlled by a municipal commission of 30 members, called the "Astinomoi", who were divided into six boards of five members each. The "Nagalaviyohalaka-mahamatras" of Ashokan inscription were no doubt associated with city administration. Kautilya also gives an account of municipal organisation.
- The Mauryan state had a complex and elaborate administration system. The king was the fountain source of all governmental activity. And all major sources for the Mauryan period emphasise on the notion of high level central control and uniform structure of the Mauryan administration. Although new analysis of the sources, specially of Ashokan inscriptions, changes the idea of Mauryan administration.

- Romila Thapar initially presented the Mauryan empire as a new form of government marked by centralized control and planning. But later she, considering various facts, suggests that the Maurya empire was not a homogeneous whole, and it subsumed different sorts of economics, politics and life ways. She also suggests that the Maurya empire should be considered as consisting of metropolitan (Magadha), core (Koshala, Vatsa, Avanti, Gandhara etc.) and peripheral areas (north-western frontier, Deccan area). The level of central control and authority of the Maurya administration on these three parts were not same or uniform. Therefore, it is not actually necessary to label the Mauryan empire as “centralised” or “decentralised”. The empire must have had some element of centralised control, but given its extent, there must also have been a significant amount of delegation of authority to functionaries at provincial, district and village levels.
- Gerard Fussman also argues that given the extent of the empire and communication networks of time, the Mauryan empire could not probably have been centralised. Mauryan rule was superimposed over a number of existing political units, which must have been allowed to continue to exercise varying degrees of autonomy.
- It would be difficult for the Mauryan state to impose central control equally on every parts of the vast empire. Though we can't deny the centripetal tendency of the Mauryan administration. But it does not mean that the Mauryan administration was uniformed and it had no varieties of local elements.

Suggested Reading :

1. Upinder Singh – A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India (From the Stone Age to the 12th Century).
2. রণবীর চক্রবর্তী – ভারত-ইতিহাসের আদিপর্ব (প্রথম পর্ব)