



**Seminar Proceedings :One Day National Seminar on
 “History of Indian Administration” (Ancient, Medieval, Modern)**

DECENTRALIZATION: THE CRUX OF GUPTA ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The Gupta period (circa 4th–6th century CE) is often hailed as a "Golden Era" in Indian history, marked by remarkable achievements in art, literature, science, and economic prosperity. A key factor behind this success was the well-structured and decentralized administrative system that allowed for efficient governance and local autonomy. Unlike the centralized Mauryan model, the Gupta administration evolved to accommodate the changing socio-political landscape, balancing royal authority with delegated power to local rulers and officials.

The empire was divided into several administrative units, including *Rajya*, *Rashtra*, *Desha*, and *Mandala*, each playing a vital role in maintaining order and governance. While the king wielded supreme power, governance was conducted with the aid of a council of ministers who handled finance, military, and administrative affairs. The system also incorporated a significant level of local participation through *grama sabhas* (village assemblies), ensuring a democratic aspect to governance. The role of guilds in economic affairs was paramount, as they regulated trade, maintained quality, and contributed to economic stability.

Revenue collection was efficiently managed through land taxes, tributes, and customs duties, ensuring a prosperous economy without overburdening the citizens. The judicial system was well-defined, promoting fair trials and justice, thereby fostering social harmony. Militarily, the Gupta rulers maintained a strong and well-organized force, including cavalry, infantry, and elephant units, which safeguarded the empire's internal and external security.

Trade networks flourished during this period, extending far beyond the Indian subcontinent through both land and maritime routes, facilitating cultural exchanges and economic growth. The decentralization of administration ensured smooth governance, economic expansion, and political stability.

This paper critically examines the administrative model of the Gupta Empire, emphasizing its decentralized nature and its impact on governance, economy, and military organization. By fostering local governance and participatory administration, the Gupta rulers laid the foundation for an efficient and sustainable political system. Their legacy continues to intrigue historians and scholars, providing valuable insights into the evolution of governance in ancient India.

INTRODUCTION:

The Gupta Empire, one of the most influential dynasties in ancient Indian history, thrived during the Golden Age of India from the early 4th century CE to the early 6th century CE. Founded by Sri Gupta, the empire reached its zenith between 319 and 467 CE, covering a significant portion of the Indian subcontinent. The Gupta rulers, particularly Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, and Skanda Gupta, played pivotal roles in shaping the empire's success. This period is often regarded as the **Golden Age** due to the remarkable advancements in various fields, including art, science, literature, and philosophy. The administration of the Gupta marks the watershed between its past and future traditions of polity and government. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration that the Gupta administration provided the model for the basic administrative structure, both in theory and practice, for the entire early medieval period of Indian history.



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King as highest authority

The rulers of the Gupta discarded the modest title of Rajan had adopted the high surrounding style brought into vogue by the Kushanas. The most characteristic of such titles was Maharajadhiraja which was used along with its several variants. In the records of North Bengal, the Gupta emperors are given the trilogy of titles-Paramadaivata Paramabhattacharaka Maharajadhiraja, which became the distinctive designation of paramount rulers of later times. Besides, the Guptas added other epithets claiming for themselves super-human qualities which raised them almost to the level of gods. In fact, in the Allahabad Pillar inscription Samudragupta is referred to as a god dwelling on earth. All the smritis of this period, though in many respects a reformulation of the already prevailing ideas, consistently emphasize on one aspect of royalty—its super-human quality. The authority of the king was checked by the council of ministers known as mantri parishad., who advised the king to follow Rajya Dharma.

Mantri Parishad: Ministerial council was called **Mantri Parishad**. It was made up of high-ranking officials (**Amatyas**) such as the **kumaramatya** and the **sandhivigrahika**. The Guptas continued the traditional machinery of bureaucratic administration with nomenclature mostly borrowed or adopted from earlier times. The mantri (high minister), whose office is known to Kautilya's Arthashastra, evidently stood at the head of civil administration. Among other high imperial officers were included the Mahabaladhikrta (Commander-in-chief), the Mahadandanayaka (general) and the Mahapratihara (chief of the place guards). The Mahabaladhikrta, probably corresponding to the Mahasenapati of the Satavahana kings, controlled a staff or subordinate officers such as the mahashvapati (chief of cavalry), Mahapilupati (officer in charge of elephants), Senapati and Baladhikrta. Similarly, the office of the Mahadandanayaka may be traced back to the Kushana times. A high ranking officer, heard of for the first time in the Gupta records, but destined to have a long career was the Sandhivigrahika (the foreign minister). Officers such as the Kumaramatyas and Ayuktas acted as a link between the central and the provincial administration under the Guptas. Kumaramatyas was the most important officer of the Gupta. They were appointed by the king in the home province and probably they were paid in cash.

Administrative divisions and governing Officers

Bhuktis (Governed by Uparika) -> Vishyas (Governed by Ayuktas or Vishyapatis)-> Vithis (Governed by Vithi) -> Gram (Governed by Gramika)

Officers in the Gupta Empire

DESIGNATION	ROLE	DESIGNATION	ROLE
Mantriparishad	Council of ministers	Akshapataladhikrita	Keeper of royal records.
Amatyas or Sachivas	Executive officers in charge of various departments	Saulkika	Collector of customs and tolls



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Sandhivigrahaka	Minister for foreign affairs, war and peace	Uparikas	Provincial Governor
Mahabaladhikrita and Mahadandanayaka	Superior posts in army	Mahapratihara	Chief of the palace guards
Mahashvapati	Commander of Cavalry	Khadyatapakita	Superintendent of the Royal kitchen.
Dandapashika	The chief officer of the police department.	Dutakas	Spies
Pilupati	head of the elephants department.	Asvapati	Head of the horse department.
Narapati: Head of footsoldiers			

Provincial administration :

Bhuktis:

The empire was divided into provinces called '**bhuktis**'. Each bhukti was administered by a provincial governor '**uparika**', who was appointed by the king. The king directly appointed the uparika, who in turn frequently appointed the district administration and the district board. Uparika continued to rule "with the enjoyment of the rule consisting of elephants, horses, and soldiers," implying control over military machinery as well. The uparika's use of the title maharaja on three **Damodarpur plates** indicates his high status and position in the administrative hierarchy. The bhuktis were further classified as '**Vishyas**'.

District Administration

Vishayas:

'Vishayas', were overseen by a Vishayapati. **Vishayapatis** were appointed by the provincial governor or, in some cases, the king himself to control the vishayas. The Vishayapati was responsible for maintaining law and order, collecting taxes, and overseeing local administration. The vishyapatis were sometimes directly appointed by the kings. The vishyapati was assisted in administrative duties by prominent members of the town.



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Lokpala:

The **Budhagupta Eran pillar inscription**, dated Gupta year 165 CE, refers to **Maharaja. Surashmichandra as a lokpala**, ruling over the land between the Kalinndi and Narmada rivers. Lokpala appears to be a provincial governor in this context.

Administrative Unit Below district level

- Clusters of settlements known as **vithi, bhumi, pathaka, and peta** were the administrative units below the district level.
- **Vithis**: Multiple villages were grouped into ‘**Vithis**’, sub-districts or modern day blocks.
- **Gram**: The bhuktis were further classified as villages '**Gram**'. The village administration was overseen by the village headman ‘Gramika’. Unlike the Mauryan period, the administration in the Gupta period appears to have been managed from the ground up.
- At the local level, the administration was carried out by village councils or Grama Sabhas. These councils were responsible for managing local affairs, resolving disputes, and ensuring the well-being of the community.
- There are references to officials known as **ayuktakas** and **vithi-mahattaras**. Villagers elected functionaries such as **gramika** and **gramadhyaksha**.
- The **Damodarpur copper plate** from the reign of Budhagupta mentions an **ashtakula-adhikarana** (a board of eight members) headed by the mahattara.
- **Mahattara** has several meanings, including village elder, village headman, and head of a family community.
- The **panchmandali**, which may have been a corporate body, is mentioned in a **Sanchi inscription** from the time of Chandragupta II.

Administration in cities

- The administration of the cities was assigned to a Parishad headed by Nagararakshaka, who was subordinate to Purapala Uparika. The Avasthika was the superintendent of Dharamsalas.
- From the Damodarpur copper plate, we get information about the local administration of the Guptas.
- The district headquarters was Adhistanas, and the court at this level was Adhikarnas.
- The information on the administration at the Vithi level is provided in the Kalaikuri inscription. Some inscriptions from the time of the Skandagupta also tell us about the administration of that period.

Centralized Administration - Ministers and Other Officials

- The authority of the king was checked by the council of ministers known as mantri parishad., who advised the king to follow Rajya Dharma.
 - Mantri Mukhya - Prime Minister
 - Sandhivigrahika - Minister in Charge of Peace and War who was in charge of contact and correspondence with other states, including initiating wars and concluding alliances and treaties.
 - Akshapataladhyaksha - Minister in Charge of Records
 - Mahabaladhyaksha - Minister in Charge of the Military
 - Mahadandanayaka or Dandanayaka - Senior Judicial
- The Allahabad prashasti refers to the **Sabha**, a ministerial assembly or council.
- High-ranking officials were referred to as **dandanayakas**, while **mahadandanayakas** were high-ranking judicial or military officers.



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- One of the seals mentions a mahadandanayaka named **Agnigupta**. The Allahabad prashasti refers to three mahadandanayakas. All of this suggests that these positions were hereditary in nature.
- Another person was given the title **mahashvapati** (commander of the cavalry), indicating military duties.
- Official ranks and designations are mentioned on seals and inscriptions, but their precise meaning is often unknown.

Revenue Administration

- The Gupta rulers implemented a sophisticated revenue system to ensure economic stability.
- The land revenue, known as Bhaga, was collected from the peasants and was usually one-sixth or one-fourth of the agricultural produce.
- The revenue administration was overseen by officers known as Samahartas or revenue collectors.
- besides Bhaga other taxes during the period were terms Bhoga, Kara, and Sulka.
- Udranga was a fixed tax (Kathiawad copper plate dated towards the end of the 6th century C.E informs us that the professions related to cloth, armor, dye, weaving, and shoemaking were taxed).
- The taxes paid in cash were known as Hiranya.
- It is generally believed that the common man was overloaded with taxes.
- In the absence of cash salaries, land grants with hereditary rights were given to various administrators in this period.
- Largely, the Brahmins who received lands were exempted from paying their taxes.
- A large number of wastelands were brought under cultivation during this period. The rulers of this period also focused on irrigation methods to increase production.

Judicial Administration

- The judicial system in the Gupta Empire was based on the principles of Dharma, and justice was dispensed through a well-organized legal system.
- The king was the ultimate authority, but local judges known as Dharmadhyakshas presided over legal matters at the district level.
- The legal system aimed to ensure fairness and uphold the principles of righteousness.
- Vaishali seal mentions the **dandapashika's adhikarana** (office), which could have been a district-level police station.

Military administration

- Military designations like **baladhikrita** and **mahabaladhikrita** (commander of infantry and cavalry) are mentioned on seals and inscriptions.
- The term "**senapati**" does not appear in Gupta inscriptions, but it may appear in some **Vakataka** epigraphs.
- The **ranabhandagar-adhikarana**, or military storehouse office, is mentioned on a Vaishali seal.
- The **mahapratihara** (chief of the palace guards) and the **khadyatapakita**(superintendent of the royal kitchen) were two officials specifically connected with the royal establishment.
- A Vaishali seal refers to a person as a mahapratihara as well as a **taravara**. The administrative structure's top layer also included **amatyas** and **sachivas**, who were executive officers in charge of various departments.



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- Spies known as **dutakas** were part of the espionage system. Another group of high-ranking officers were the **ayuktakas**.

Conclusion

Gupta Empire's administrative structure was characterized by a centralized hierarchy, with the king as the highest authority. Provinces, districts, and villages were efficiently governed through appointed officials, ensuring effective control over the vast territories. This administrative model, marked by decentralization and institutionalized practices, left a lasting impact on the subsequent periods of Indian history. The decentralization of power allowed for effective governance at various levels, and the emphasis on justice, economic management, and military strength contributed to the Gupta Empire's success during this period in Indian history.

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