

THE LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT UNDER THE IMPERIAL MAURYAS: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE MAURYAN VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION THROUGH THE KAUTILYAN DIKTAT

Ashwani Kumar

*Assistant Professor, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of
Punjab, Bathinda*

Abstract

Self-government literally means a system in which the people rule themselves and control their own affairs without any external political or administrative authority. The term denotes active participation of people in the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at the smooth functioning of government particularly at the smallest level of administration. In a massive and diverse nation like India, it becomes a daunting task for the centre as well as even for the state governments to look after the administration directly and tackle the adverse conditions if they arise, from one pivotal point. In other words, we may say that centralized governance may not be effective and meaningful in handling and managing day-to-day affairs which makes a decentralized administration almost inevitable. It was hence implemented through Panchayats, Municipalities and Corporations in India after the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments which gave recognition and protection and power to the local governments. The arrangement of the local bodies at the grassroot level of administration appears new in India but the roots of such decentralisation of administration may be traced to ancient times in Indian history. The present paper is an attempt to explore and analyse the functioning of the local self government during the Mauryan period which was given legal sanction by Kautilya through his magnificent text on polity and administration.

Keywords: *Arthashastra, Gramini, Samaharta, Gopa, Sthanika, Sthaniya, Dronamukha, Karvatika, Samgrahana, Elder Men.*



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The local self government literally means the independence and responsibility of the village to administer the local affairs as the smallest unit of administration. In contemporary time the term local self government is synonymous to the village autonomy which refers to those bodies which are constituted to look after the administration of relatively smaller areas in the hierarchy of administration such as city, town or village. The very much purpose of the village autonomy or the local self government is to deal with the issues of the smallest units of administration by working at the grass-root level and coming close to the people who are directly affected by the policies of the government. Participation of local citizens in decision making as well as implementation of the policies is the essence of local self government. These bodies can be said as instruments of democratic governments for providing services to

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the local communities without sharing any sovereignty with state as well as central governments.

The genesis of the local self government or the rural autonomy in modern sense in the Indian context may be traced to the colonial period when it was initiated by Lord Rippon, the viceroy of India in 1880's. The modern Indian state administratively is arranged in three tiers i.e., central, state and local. The 73rd and 74th amendment acts of the Indian Constitution gave recognition, authority and protection to the local governments i.e., village and urban governments respectively.¹ The 73rd amendment act specifically dealt with the delegation of powers and responsibilities to the governments in the rural localities under the panchayati raj system.

This modern or more specifically the contemporary concept of the local self government or rural autonomy in the Indian context may be traced to the ancient times where the village used to be the smallest unit of the administration. The village has always remained the integral part of the social and economic life since vedic age in India. Similarly, in the political sphere it has remained the primary territorial unit of administration. The governance of the village was usually carried under the supervision, control and direction of the village headmen called *graminias* is being referred to in the vedic literature. In the vedic period the village was essentially considered as an independent unit of administration and the village government carried out the activities through the village headman (*gramini*) who was assisted by the village elders. In the post vedic period of Indian history the village retained its socio-economic and political significance as is reflected through the Jatakas and smriti literature. During the Mauryan period, the village assembly organized works of common utilities, education and settlement of disputes between groups etc.²

The village during the Mauryan period of Indian history appears more or less as autonomous unit of administration in the *Arthashastra*, the writing of which was initiated if not completed by Kautilya (Vishnugupta), the prime minister of Chandragupta Maurya. The date of the text has remained a debatable issue among the scholars since its finding in 1905. The dates however vary from 3rd century BCE to 4th century CE. We here in the present paper have accepted 3rd century BCE as the date of the compilation of the text. The text quite extensively deals with polity, diplomacy and administration which was designed to guide the kings and princes in governing the state efficiently and effectively. While dealing with the administrative aspect of the state, the text throws a welcome light on the local self

government where the village comprised the smallest and the lowest tier of the administrative hierarchy.

In the working of the local self government the towns and cities were kept under strict control but the villages were more or less free from the active jurisdiction of state officials. They were instead managed by the body of local men who were elected people headed by the *gramini* or the village headman.³The village communities controlled and administered by the *gramini*, in the days of Mauryas were economically self-sufficient and politically self-governing units.

The villages as per the reference from the *Arthashastra* were caused to be settled down by the king either on new sites or on old ruins (*bhutapurvama va*) either by bringing the people from foreign countries (*paradesapravahanena*) or by moving people from the densely populated areas from within his own empire (*svadesabhishyandavamanena va*).⁴The *Arthashastra*, gives an elaborate classification of villages under the headman (*gramini*) for revenue, economy and defence purposes. The boundaries of the villages consisting each of not less than a hundred families and of not more than five-hundred families of agricultural people of shudra caste, with boundaries extending as far as a *kroshta* (2250 yards) or two were to be denoted by a river, a mountain, a forest, a stretch of pebbles, sand etc., (*bhrishti*), caves, artificial buildings (*setubandha*), or by trees such as silk cotton tree (*shalmali*), Acacia Suma(*shami*) and milk(y) trees (*kshiravriksha*) like *ashvattha*, *nyagrodha* etc.⁵

The king was to establish headquarters of revenue officers like *gopa* and *sthanika* etc. for a certain number of villages which were arranged in the hierarchical order according to the number of villages such as a *sthaniya* in the middle of eight hundred villages, a *dronamukha* in the middle of four hundred villages, a *karvatika* in the middle of two hundred villages and *samgrahana* in the midst of ten villages.⁶

The *Arthashastra* recommends the kingdom (*janapada*) to be divided into four divisions and the villages (*grama*) to be subdivided as of first, middle and lowest rank. After this division, according to the text, the administrator or the collector general (*Samaharta*) shall bring them under one or another of the following heads:⁷

- a) The villages that are exempted from taxation (*pariharaka*)
- b) The villages those that supply soldiers (*ayudhiyam*)
- c) The villages that pay their taxes in the form of grains (*dhanya*), cattle (*pashu*), gold (*hiranya*), or raw material (*kupya*)

d) The villages that supply free labour (*vishti*), and dairy products in lieu of taxes (*pratikara*).

The *gopa* (the village accountant or the revenue officer), was assigned the duty to attend to the accounts of five or ten villages as ordered by the administrator.⁸ The administrator, according to the *Arthashastra*, was responsible to register gifts, sales, charities, and remission of taxes regarding fields (*kshetra*) after setting up boundaries to villages, numbering plots of grounds as cultivated (*krishta*), uncultivated (*akrishta*), plains (*sthala*), wet lands (*kedara*), gardens (*arama*), vegetable gardens (*shanda*), fences (*vata*), forests (*vana*), altars (*vastu chaitya*), temples of gods (*devagriha*), irrigation works (*setubandha*), cremation grounds (*shamshana*), feeding houses (*sattra*), places where water is freely supplied to travellers (*prapa*), places of pilgrimage (*punayasthana*), pasture grounds (*vivita*) and roads (*patha*) and thereby fixing the boundaries of various villages, of fields (*kshetra*), of forests (*aranya*), and of roads (*patha*).⁹

Registration of the inhabitants of all four castes (*chatur varnayam*) as well as the exact number of cultivators (*karshaka*), cowherds (*gorakshaka*), merchants (*vaidehak*), artisans (*karu*), labourers (*karmakara*), slaves (*dasa*), and biped (*dvipada*) and quadruped (*chatushpada*) creatures etc. alongwith fixing the amount of gold (*hiranya*), free labour (*vishti*), toll (*shulka*), and fines (*danda*) that can be collected from each house after having numbered the houses as taxpaying or non-taxpaying was the duty of the administrator.¹⁰ He was also entrusted the duty to keep an account of the number of male and female, young and old men that reside in each house, their history (*charitra*), occupation (*ajiva*), income (*aya*), and expenditure (*vyaya*).¹¹ The collector-general (*samhartar*), according to the *Arthashastra*, had to depute commissioners (*pradeshtarha*) to inspect the work done and the means employed by the village and district officers alongwith the collection of the special religious tax known as *bali* (*balipragraham cha kuryuh*) in those places which were under the jurisdiction of *gopa* and *sthanika*.¹²

Agents in the guise of householders (*grihapatika*) as directed by the collector-general (*samhartar*) were assigned the task to ascertain the validity of the accounts of the village and district officers regarding the fields, houses and families of each village. They were also assigned the task to find out the area and output of produce regarding fields, right of ownership and remission of taxes with regard to houses, and the caste and profession regarding families.¹³ They were also to ascertain the total number of men and animals (*janghagra*) as well as the amount of income (*aya*) and expenditure (*vyaya*) of each

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family.¹⁴In the same way the spies in the guise of ascetics, as directed by the collector general (*samahatra*), were assigned the task to collect information regarding the honesty or dishonesty of cultivators (*karashaka*), cowherds (*gorakshaka*), merchants (*vaidehika*), and heads of various departments (*adhyakshanam*).¹⁵

Thus the *Arthashastra* makes it very clear that the collector-general being vigilant and energetic should take care of the affairs of the countryside. His subordinates stationed in different establishment should look after their respective duties in coordination with their colleagues.¹⁶

The *Arthashastra* prescribes concrete arrangements for the safety and security of the country side. The text makes it clear that the forts (*durga*) should be constructed in the extremities of the kingdom which were to be manned by boundary-guards (*antapala*) whose duty shall be to guard the entrances into the kingdom.¹⁷The striking thing was that the country sides were to be guarded by the local people. The interior of the kingdom was to be watched or guarded by trappers (*vagurika*), archers (*shabara*), hunters (*pulinda*), outcastes (*chandala*) and forest-dwellers (*aranyachara*).¹⁸Whether these were recruited and paid by state or not is not made clear by Kautilya. The social composition of the guards suggests that they may be considered as a part of the self-sufficient village system. The king granted tax free and fine free (*adandkaranya*) land (*brahmadeya*), yielding sufficient produce, to those who perform sacrifices (*ritvik*), spiritual guides, priests, and those learned in the Vedas (*ritvigacharyapurohitashrotriyebyho*). Apart from them the superintendents (*adhyaksha*), accountants (*sankhyayaka*), *gopas*, *sthanikas*, veterinary surgeons (*anikastha*), physicians (*chikitasaka*), horse-trainers (*ashvadamkaja*), and messengers too were endowed with lands without the right to alienate by sale or mortgage (*vikrayadhanvajrani*).¹⁹

The cultivable fields were to be allotted to tax payers (*karada*) for life (*ekaipurushikani*).²⁰The unarable lands were not to be taken back from those who were making efforts to make them cultivable.²¹Lands were to be taken away by the king from those who do not cultivate them; and given to others or village servants/labourers (*gramabhritaka*) and traders (*vaidehaka*) who shall till them. Those who do not till the land were required to make good of the loss to the state treasury. If the cultivators paid their taxes regularly, they, as per the information from the *Arthashastra*, were favourably supplied with grains, cattle, and money by the state.²²

The cultivators were to be given certain concession and exemptions on the occasion of opening new settlements or on any other emergency situations by the king if that did not affect the royal treasury.²³The king, according to the *Arthashastra*, was to set going work in

mines, factories, exploit timber and elephant forests, offer facilities for cattlebreeding and commerce, construct water and land routes and set up ports (*panyapattana*).²⁴ Alongwith this the king had the duty to ensure the irrigation facilities for which he was to construct reservoirs (*setu*) filled with natural water source or with the water drawn from some other source. According to the text under study, it was responsibility of the king to provide the villages with sites, roads, trees, implements and also render aid to the building of holy places and parks (*punyasthana*).²⁵

The cooperative constructions were unique features of the village in ancient India where people voluntarily offered their services for the betterment of village community. If someone, according to the *Arthashastra*, created obstructions or walked away from any kind of cooperative construction like that of irrigation (*sambhuya setubhandhat*) was to send his servants and bullocks to carry on his work, he had to contribute a share in the expenditure, but was not entitled any share from the benefits derived.²⁶ The *Arthashastra* prescribes it as the duty of the king to provide the children, the aged persons, the people in distress, the afflicted and the helpless with maintenance. He was also expected to ensure subsistence to the women who had borne no child or when they were carrying and also to the children they had given birth to when these were helpless.²⁷ Safeguarding and augmenting the property of the people of village as well as of the temples was the collective responsibility of the the elders of the villages.²⁸

Kautilya makes arrangements to protect villages from any external aggression or intrusion in his text. The text very strongly prohibits the entry of any ascetic other than a brahmanical forest hermit (*vanaprastha*), any association other than the one of local birth (*sajatadanyah samghah*) and any guilds of any kind other than local cooperative guilds (*samutthayikadanyahsamanubandho*).²⁹ The villages were also protected from any obstruction created by various internal factors/agents for which Kautilya strictly prohibits the construction of any park or halls (*shala*) for recreation or entertainment in the village. Similarly, the actors, dancers, singers, musicians, stupid and silly people and bards (*kushilava*) and professional story tellers were not allowed in the village to make any disturbance in the work of the villagers as the agriculture was almost the sole source of their subsistence.³⁰ The king shouldered the responsibility of protecting the agriculture from atrocities of excessive fines, labourers and taxes, and herds of cattle from thieves, wild animals like tigers, poisonous creatures and various cattle diseases.³¹ It was duty of the king to ensure the safety of trade routes from the harassment of king's courtiers, state officers,

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robbers, frontier chiefs and also from the herds of cattle.³² Thus the *Arthashastra* instructed the king to not only maintain the things created in past such as timber and elephant forests, buildings and mines but to start or create new ones too.³³

The *Arthashastra* has been very particular regarding the involvement of the village people in the formulation and implementation of policies affecting the village community and administration. Many active social duties and functions related to the village were entrusted to the village elders. The text has at many places referred to the elders of the village who played significant role in the administration of village. In the matters arising out of the shares of the minors, the text states that these issues shall be placed in the safe custody of the relatives of their mothers, or of aged gentlemen of the village, till they attain their majority. The same rule was applicable in the cases of those who have gone abroad.³⁴ Similarly, in sale and purchase of property in the village, the village elders were given the utmost importance as witness and decisive authority.

According to the *Arthashastra*, the neighbours of good family, forty in number and different from the purchasers, should congregate in front of the building for sale and announce it as such. Accurate description of the exact boundaries of fields, gardens, buildings of any kind, lakes or tanks were to be declared before the elders of the village or of the neighbourhood.³⁵ In the matters of disputes regarding the boundary between any two villages, neighbours or elders of five or ten villages (*panchagrami dasagrami va*) were given the power to investigate the case on the evidence to be furnished from natural or artificial boundary marks. Elders among cultivators and herdsmen, or outsiders who have had the experience of former possession in the place, or one or many persons (not) personally acquainted with the boundary marks under dispute were to first describe the boundary marks, and then, wearing unusual dress (*viparitaveshah*), had the power and responsibility to lead the people to the place.³⁶

Disputes concerning fields were also to be decided by the elders of the neighbourhood or of the village. If there was difference of opinions among them, decision was to be sought for from a number of pure and respectable people, or, the disputants could equally divide the disputed holding among themselves.³⁷ All kinds of disputes such as of pasture lands, fields (*kedara*), flower gardens, threshing-floors (*khala*), houses, and stables of horses (*vahanakoshtha*) etc. according to the text, were to be settled down on the evidence to be furnished by neighbours.³⁸ While prescribing the rules concerning debts and deposits, the *Arthashastra* gives great importance to the village elders for resolving the matters arising out

of certain circumstances. The text states that in the absence of the creditor or mediator (*prayojahasannidhana*), the amount of the debt may be kept in the custody of the elders of the village and the debtor may have the pledged property redeemed; or with its value fixed at the time and with no interest chargeable for the future, the pledge may be left where it is.³⁹

The involvement of the elders of the village in dealing with the key issues such as protection, integration and augmentation of private, communal as well as religious property, demarcation of boundaries of village and fields and almost unchallenged acceptance of their decisions by the village community kept the age old spirit of village autonomy alive during the reign of the imperial Mauryas.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we may safely conclude that the village under the imperial Mauryas continued to exist as a self-sufficient unit of the administration which remained the basis of higher political structure. They survived successive turmoils or changes of fortune and continued to maintain the backbone of society and economy of ancient India in spite of the rise and fall of empires. The village was regarded as a cooperative social unit and its head (*gramini*) was vested with minor magisterial authority and was empowered to expel thieves, criminals, adulterers and other undesirable persons to maintain law and order in the village. He was assisted by a number of officials some of whom were elected by the people and some appointed by the state. The village headman continued to be the most significant adviser to the king who constantly, by and large was consulted by him about rural affairs. Initiatives and administrative responsibilities regarding local affairs in particular were vested exclusively with him. The *samaharta*, the head of the *janapada*, primarily responsible for revenue assessment, was assisted by *sthanika* and *gopa* who being local leaders or officials, carried out detailed census periodically for revenue administration. Besides revenue assessment and collection, these officials enforced law and order. Men of the locality, particularly the elders and respected men played crucial role in village administration. Certain duties such as buildings of temples or holy places, public halls or resting places and the creation of dams were delegated to village people for which the cooperation among them in works of public utility was enforced by law.

In newly settled villages, the smooth functioning of the village community was ensured by establishing village officials by grants of land who were primarily concerned with the protection of the lives and property of the subjects. The officer of lower rank was required to report to his superior officer if he failed in the tasks assigned to him. The *Arthashastra* states

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that the officers were individually responsible for protecting people's lives, maintaining records of revenues, dues and remissions, and deciding civil and criminal suits at the headquarters of ten, two hundred, four hundred, and eight hundred villages. The cultivators were given grants of land and loans of money and corn. Water supply was ensured by erecting dams or constructing reservoirs, either by the state or with the help of such co-operative undertakings on the part of the villagers. Villages were also provided security from the activity of external as well as internal exploiters. The self governing village remained a feature of Indian political life. In the absence of a central representative body, they ensured the continuance of the government as well as unhindered economic progress.

The Mauryan state, though a highly centralized monarchical state, allowed the freedom to the local self government from central control which helped them in their healthy existence rather than trying to destroy the spirit of self-government. Kautilya appears to be a believer in the efficiency and benefit of a strong centralized monarchy at one hand and an advocate of rural autonomy at the other or we may say that though being a supporter of a powerful king yet he did not oppose village autonomy and provided ample space to the local self governments to administer the local affairs with a minimal pressure from the central or provincial governments.

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