

INDIAN GOVERNMENT - Ancient period

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Overview

The systems of government that evolved over the many centuries of Indian history begin with (what we believe to have been) an egalitarian hunter-gatherer society in prehistoric time. From the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE), administrative systems oscillate between a centralised state and a federal state (based on regionalism), and some uneasy compromises between the two. The origins of the modern Indian state lie in the structures introduced by the Delhi Sultanate, refined by the Mughal Empire and finally encoded by British Rule. Although parliamentary democracy represents a leap into modernity, some of the fundamental administrative units and processes have not changed much since about 1500 CE.

Prehistory

The political system of prehistoric India is purely a matter of speculation, although some parallels can be drawn from ethnographic research on modern stone-age groups. In general, we can assume that the small number of individuals in any group (estimated between 20-60) did not require any formal system at all. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that some methods of censure, resource distribution and status recognition would have existed. The important point is that these processes would have been informal and flexible.

Indus Valley Civilisation

Theocracy theory Based on a now-discarded analogy from ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was once assumed that the IVC was a theocracy, with its centre at Mohenjo-Daro or Harappa. A famous figure of a bearded man was put forward as ‘a priest-king’, and a large building in Mohenjo-Daro (the ‘citadel’) was widely accepted as a centre for ritual and state authority. The citadel, however, has recently been identified as a grain storage facility.

Centralisation Nevertheless, some degree of centralised state organisation linking the wide geographic spread of the IVC is suggested by the uniformity of houses, mud-bricks, weight measures, inscribed seals, grid pattern of streets, street drainage and grain storage. Centralisation is most obvious in the sophisticated drainage system. Houses were equipped with bathing areas, latrines and sewage drains. Linked to larger mains, which eventually emptied outside the city walls, the sewers would have removed wastewater from the habitation areas and deposited fertile sludge on the surrounding agricultural fields. On the other hand, the vast territory and rudimentary transport system would have made centralisation difficult to achieve.

Regionalism Recent research has tended to support the opposite claim: that the IVC political system was dominated by regionalism. New evidence has led to the idea that there were six or seven regional administrative centres, each with links to villages in the hinterland. These regional centres, it is claimed, were the major cities (Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Lothal, Rakhigari, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Rupar), where political and commercial power was concentrated. Each centre operated like a city-state or a complex chieftaincy. Power was shared among various elite kin-groups rather than a hereditary monarchy. And power was gained through trade rather than warfare.

Indo-Aryan civilisation

Tribes Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes (*jana*), with a chief (*raja*), who was advised by two different tribal councils (*sabha* and *samiti*). As Indo-Aryan populations moved ever eastward, from the rivers of the Punjab to the plains of north India, particularly the Gangetic region, these semi-nomadic pastoralists mixed with indigenous peoples, producing settled agricultural communities. Although the tribe remained the basis of Indo-Aryan society, power became dependent less on wealth and more on the ability to forge alliances. The most powerful tribes of the ancient period were the Panchala, formed from five independent tribes, and the Kuru, an amalgam of two separate tribes.

Chiefdoms These larger, composite tribes that controlled greater territory were called *janapadas* (lit. ‘foothold of a tribe’). We have the names of nearly 40 chiefdoms from early Sanskrit texts. By 800 BCE these Neolithic farming and pastoralist communities combined into yet larger political structures called *maha* (‘great’) *janapadas*, or complex chiefdoms. Sixteen of these complex chiefdoms dominated north India in this period, stretching from Taxila, in the northwest to Anga, in the far east. These include Kosala, with its capital at Ayodhya, where Rama of the *Ramayana* ruled; Magadha, with its capital at Pataliputra, later the capital of the Mauryan Empire; Kuru, with its capital at Indraprastha, whose two factions fought the war described in the *Mahabharata*.

Classical Period

Mauryan Empire The long evolution in north India from tribe to chiefdom to state culminated in the establishment of the Mauryan Empire (321- 185 BCE). Its more immediate cause, however, was Alexander’s invasion, which stimulated feuding rulers to join together for protection. Chandragupta, founder of the empire, took advantage of the chaos caused by both the Greek incursion in the northwest and the breakdown of smaller kingdoms elsewhere to conquer large swathes of territory, with the exception of south India. The Mauryas defeated a second Greek invasion in the northwest and eventually pushed east, extending their authority to the Bay of Bengal. At its height, the Mauryan state was an efficient bureaucracy with a large civil service. Despite its centralised administration, however, the Mauryan state could not exert control over its extensive territory. Four main provinces were controlled by local princes, while other regions were run by governors and salaried officials. The last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by one of his own generals in 185 BCE.

Post-Mauryan states Following the break-up of the Mauryan Empire, a series of smaller but still powerful states ruled north India. The first of these was the Shungas, who retained Pataliputra as their capital and reigned from 185-78 BCE. Next came the Shakas (or Indo-Scythians), a central Asian people who migrated and fought their way into India in the first century CE. Although they controlled large tracts of territory in the north and west, they ruled for only a brief time. Another kingdom with its origins in Central Asia was the Kushana (or Kushan), which ruled Bactria and the surrounding regions (modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) before pushing south into India, where they ruled from about 100-250 CE. The Deccan was ruled by the Satavahanas (c. 200 BCE-230 CE), fighting off two invasions by the Shakas along the way. Less centralised than the Mauryan Empire, the Satavahana state was based on alliances with local rulers. They were also the first Indian kingdom to issue coinage with portraits of their rulers.

Gupta Empire Most of India was once again unified in a single administration under the Gupta Empire (320-c. 550 CE). Like the Satavahanas, the Gupta rulers used alliances, in the form of dynastic marriages, and warfare to gain control over territory. Chandragupta I (r. 320-335 CE, not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya several centuries earlier) married a princess from the Licchavi clan (in the Himalayan foothills), and his son, Samudragupta (r. 335-385 CE), extended the kingdom to the Deccan by more marriages. The empire was administered by a cadre of officials dispatched to localities to oversee an extensive system of tax-free land grants to Brahmins and merchants. This system permitted local leaders to exercise considerable authority and yet be responsible to the centre. The result was a state in which regional units and diverse communities prospered and cohered in a political whole.

Decentralisation The Gupta state thus instituted two key features of government that characterised states throughout the medieval period and into the pre-modern period. First, states and localities existed in a balance of power. The authority of the centre was residual in that judicial and police functions were left in the hands of local rulers, guilds and associations. Second, and as a result of this decentralisation, the centre assumed more and more symbolic power and authority.