Administration of ancient Bengal

Introduction: The administration system of ancient Bengal was characterized by a complex network of local, regional, and imperial authorities. The region was ruled by various dynasties, including the Mauryas, Guptas, Palas, and Senas, each of which had its unique administrative structure. In this essay, we will discuss the administration system of ancient Bengal, focusing on the role of local and imperial authorities.

Mauryan Administration:

The Mauryan administration was known for its triumph of monarchy in India. Kautilya's Arthashastra has a detailed description of the Mauryan administration. This was considered to be the authentic source to draw an account of the Mauryan administration.

Mauryan Administration – State Control

- The Mauryan administration was highly centralized.
- Though it was a monarchy form of government which Kautilya insisted on, he stood against royal absolutism. He advocated on idea that the king should run the administration with assistance from the council of ministers
- A council of ministers called **Mantriparishad** was thus appointed to assist the king.
- The council consisted of **Purohita**, **Mahamantri**, **Senapthi** and **Yuvaraja**.
- The important functionaries were known as the **Tirthas**.
- **Amatyas** were the civil servants who were appointed to maintain day-to-day administration.
- **Rajukas were a class of officers appointed by Ashoka, who were responsible for rewarding and punishing the people.**
- To supervise the spread of dhamma, **Dhamma Mahamatras** were appointed.
- The Capital city of the Mauryan empire, Pataliputra was administered by six committees each consisting of five members.
- Two dozen departments of the state were maintained to control the social and economic activities near the capital city.
- In the Mauryan administration, spies were maintained to track foreign enemies and officers.

Gupta Administration:

A study of the epigraphical records of the Gupta Empire shows that there was a hierarchy of administrative divisions from top to bottom. The empire was called by various names such as *Rajya*, *Rashtra*, *Desha*, *Mandala*, *Prithvi*, and *Avani*. It was divided into 26 provinces, which were styled as *Bhukti*, *Pradesha*, and *Bhoga*. Provinces were also divided into *Vishayas* and put under the control of the *Vishayapati*s. A *Vishayapati* administered the *Vishaya* with the help of the *Adhikarana* (council of representatives), which comprised four representatives: *Nagarasreshesthi*, *Sarthavaha*, *Prathamakulika*, and *Prathama Kayastha*. A part of the *Vishaya* was called *Vithi*.

The role of the Guptas in the introduction of administrative and land systems is particularly significant in the history of Bengal. The economic condition of Bengal was good during the Gupta period. But in the 6th century, when the Gupta Empire was weakened by internal rebellions and repeated invasions by Injati, two independent states named Gaud and Banga emerged in Bengal.

Type of Government. Based in northern India, the Gupta Empire (320–600) was one of the largest political and military empires in world history. While the Gupta rulers named themselves the king of kings, they did not claim to be of divine origin and ruled with relative benevolence.

They mainly traded with Rome, Thailand, Malaysia, Western Asia, China, and the Eastern Archipelago. Trading with many other countries caused their culture to spread and the belief in Buddhism to expand.

They traded goods such as Spices, precious, paddy, horses, copper, indigo, sugar cane, wheat, drugs, pearls, fruits, cotton, ivory, Muslin, calico, linen, and varieties of clothing. Fruits and other food were exported to acquire silk and other goods. Trade of clothing to other countries came from China and went through India to reach Africa/Rome.

Administration of Pala Empire

- The Pala dynasty created its administration model **based on the Gupta Empire's** administrative practices.
- The Pala Dynasty had a **monarchical administrative structure**. All power was concentrated in the hands of the king or monarch.
- **Parameshwar**, **Paramvattaraka, or Maharajadhiraja** were offered to the Pala rulers.
- In the Pala dynasty, the **throne** was passed down through the generations.
- The King was aided by a **group of ministers** who were hereditary and nominated by the King from prominent families.
- Some provinces in the Pala Empire were under the direct rule of the King, while others were under the **control of Vassal chiefs**.
- The regions governed by the **Vassal chiefs** were granted autonomy. They provided the King with fixed contributions and troops.
- The Pala Empire's lands that were managed directly were divided into many **provinces** known as **Bhuktis** and governed by **officials** known as **Uparika**.
- **Uparika** collected the levy and preserved the province's law and order.
- These **Bhuktis (Provinces)** were further segmented into **Vishaya (Divisions)** and **Mandala (Districts).**
- Further, they were divided into smaller units like Khandala, Bhaga, Avritti, Chaturaka, and Pattaka.

Land Grants by Palas

- The Pala monarchs gave **land grants** to Brahmans, priests, and temples. These were long-term grants.
- Buddhist monasteries were also given land concessions.
- The land concessions came with a slew of financial and administrative benefits.
- The Pala grants are dedicated to the **maintenance of law and order** as well as the administration of justice.

Sena Administration

- In general, the Pala system of government was maintained under the Senas of Bengal. Even during the Senas, there were still administrative divisions such as Bhuktis, Vishayas, Mandals, etc.
- The names Patakas and Chaturakas, are frequently used in inscriptions and literature from the Sena era.
- The Sena kings adopted King Aswapati, King Narapati, King Rajaprayadhapati, and others. This suggests that the Senas of Bengal gave greater weight to minor administrative divisions. Bhuktipati, Mandalpati, and Vishayapati are common royal officers. Mahamantri was the new title of the Palas' Prime Minister.
- Evidence shows that the Sena monarchs gave their Queen or Rajmahishi land concessions. The Purohitas and Mahapurohitas were also granted land through official grants. This shows how much respect and importance the Purohitas and Mahapurohitas

had attained. Under the Senas of Bengal, the Sandhivigrahika of the Palas adopted the appellation Mahasandhivigrahika.

- The Senas of Bengal appointed Mahamudradhkrita and Mahasarbadhkrita. The highest judge was also known as Mahadharmadhyakshya. Under the Senas of Bengal, the military officers also adopted new names. In this context, Mahapilupati, Mahaganastha, and Mahabyutpati may be mentioned.
- There is a reference to 29 classes of officers under the Senas of Bengal in Iswar Ghosh's copperplate. There have never been so many different classes or grades of officers in independent Bengal. It must be noted that the basic framework of the Palas' governance under the Senas of Bengal remained the same.
- During the Sena era, the class of officers known as Pradeshtris, which Kautilya mentions, was also appointed. This demonstrates how the Sena administration was influenced by the Hindu administrative structure.
- Last but not least, it must be noted that the Sena era was also one of peace and prosperity in Bengal's history. Society, politics, and religion all saw improvements under the Senas of Bengal.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the administration system of ancient Bengal was based on the principles of decentralization, justice, and moral conduct. The system was designed to promote social harmony and the welfare of the people, with power distributed among various local, regional, and imperial authorities. The use of spies and the development of a sophisticated system of water management were unique features of the administration system of ancient Bengal. The legacy of this administration system can still be seen in the governance structures of modern-day West Bengal and Bangladesh