

Police Administration in Ancient India: A Historical Study

Abstract

For safeguarding the person and property of the people and for maintaining order in the society, the state was created and the King, as a Head, established an law enforcing agency, known in present day terminology 'Police'. Policing in any country under any system of governance and during any period of time has always been a responsibility of the ruler. The police, which we see today, has its roots in the very foundation of the state and passing various phases of history it has evolved to its present status. The prime characteristic of ancient Indian police system was its community orientation, functional, specialisation, decentralisation and expertization.

Keywords: Ancient, Administration, Law and order, Peace, Mauryan, Gupta, Sources, Police, Society, Dharma.

Introduction

The term 'police' has been derived from the Latin word 'politia' which means the condition of a Polis or state. Conceptually, the word 'police' has been derived from the Greek word 'polis', that is a city¹. The term broadly refers to purposeful maintenance of public order and protection of persons and property, from the hazards of public accidents and commission of unlawful acts. It refers to civil functionaries charged with maintaining public order and safety and enforcing the law including the prevention and detection of crime.² According to Oxford dictionary, the term 'police' means a system of regulation for the preservation of order and enforcement of law. It also defines police as an official organization whose job is to make people obey the law and to prevent and solve crime.³

Aim of the Study

A historical study of the police administration unfolds the different degrees of accountability of Indian police during different periods. The Harappan civilization was the first urban civilization of the Indian subcontinent. Well-planned ancient towns can be observed at some Harappan centres. Surplus production was in practice and trade-activity was in full swing. We are not in position to decipher Indus script with full accuracy, because of unavailability any bilingual inscription of Harappan times. So due to lack of literary sources, we are not able to know each and every aspect of their social structure and administrative setup. But it can be assumed with some confidence that there might be some sort of police-organisation prevailed in Harappan Era. On the basis of literary sources, the origin of police-administration can be traced to the earliest Vedic period of the Indian history. *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda* mention certain kinds of crime known to Vedic India.

In order to get relief from the prevailing chaotic situation and danger in society of early periods, the peace-loving and right minded people decided to frame a code of conduct for the whole society. This self-imposed code, known as *Dharma*, later came to be known as 'law'. As there was no institution such as the state or king, the authority behind *dharma* was believed to be divine power and fear of God. The existence of such an ideal "state less society" is graphically described in the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata* as under:

There was neither kingdom nor the king,
neither punishment nor the guilty to be punished.
people were acting according to Dharma
and thereby protecting one another.⁴

It appears to be common in all the theories of the origin of state that a chaotic situation had arisen and the people to get rid of such a situation decided to create an institution and confer on its head the powers of governance. The institution so created, by the people later came to be known as the state and its head as the king. In this regards Panniker

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opines: "The kingship thus established was essentially a secular office, meant for the protection of the people, who accepted the sovereignty of the king. The king was by no means absolute in his powers. He was subject to the sacred law, had to maintain and uphold the social order, to enforce justice and receive in return the obedience of his people and a share of their produce⁵ Thus the State came into being for the protection of the people from external aggression as well from internal disturbances and to punish those who violated the norms of dharma. This system later came to be recognized as the criminal justice system and the agency as the Police. The kings in ancient India had their own network of secret intelligence and tried to remain well informed about the nature and incidence of crimes and the award of adequate and proportionate punishment to criminals.

Mauryan Period

We have detailed accounts of police organizations and police activities during the Mauryan period. The ancient writers and poets of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages seem to have special knowledge about the administration of order and justice prevailing during that period. There was no independent police department with exclusive functions of detection and control of crimes but there existed several agencies pursuing a co-ordinated policy for the maintenance of law and order in the society. Kautilya has recorded full development of police in his 'Arthasashtra' yielding systematic information about investigation, patterns of crime, punishments etc. The Arthasashtra mention that the police during ancient India was divided into two parts, namely the regular police and the secret police. The regular police consisted of three tiers of officials: The Pradesta (rural) or the Nagaraka (urban) at the top, Sthanikas in the middle and the Gopas at the bottom. In Kautilya's work the secret police is divided into two categories namely, the peripatetic and the stationary.⁶

Arthasashtra of Kautilya, written around 4th - 3rd B.C. throws light on the state of the society and the administration, system of administering justice and also the state of crime during Mauryas. The Arthasashtra is a treatise on the criminal justice system. It reads like a manual for the police in modern times. According to it, the smallest administrative police unit was the village. The village councils were responsible to detect and prevent crime under the supervision of the headman. Danvarika, the warden of police was responsible for keeping strict vigilance on the management of the royal palace. Antervansika, a lady officer, was responsible to maintain vigilance on the ladies of the royal household. There were three types of police officers, namely, Dandapala, Durgapala and Antpala. Atavikas were the police soldiers particularly for operation in the forest areas. Over all, the Mauryan system of criminal justice was rigorous and espionage based.⁷

During Ashoka's reign, the criminal justice system was tempered and moderated by the Buddhist philosophy, piety and non-violence. During his reign, Mahamatras were the highest executive officers in a province responsible for overall peace and order of the province. Pradesikas were under Mahamatras.

They were responsible for collection of revenue and maintenance of peace, law and order, administration of justice. Rajjukas were under the Pradesike. They were responsible for the welfare and happiness of the Janapada with absolute powers in matter of rewards and punishments. Ayuktas were answerable to Rajjukas and Pradesikas. Pratedakas were the intelligent police. They were responsible for the intelligence regarding the affairs of the state and the police.⁸

Manusmriti mentions about the art of secret intelligence prevalent in ancient period for prevention and detection of crime. The instructions prescribed for the King to detect offences with the help of soldiers and spies in Manusmriti, and mention of informant and investigating officer in Katyayanasmriti also suggest that an agency like modern police existed in ancient period to assist the king in administration of justice. 9 The police stations of today originate from the ancient Sthanakas. Manu recommended that police stations or may be police pickets, should be established one being intended for a collection of several villages.¹⁰ A person who was appointed by the king to detect commission of offences was called Suchaka (Investigation officer).¹¹ The King post soldiers and spies for patrolling such places and in order to keep away thieves and anti-social elements, It also permits the King to appoint reformed thieves, who were formerly associated with such doubtful elements and through them detect and punish offenders.¹²

Magashtenes, the Greek ambassador and Fahien, the Chinese traveller wrote a detailed account of the administration during the Gupta periods. In Guptan times the police existed as a separate organisation albeit in an elementary form, is confirmed by Vishakhdutta's Mudrarakshasa. Dandni in his framed work 'Daskumarchaita, throws welcome light on the activities of police department in urban areas. During Gupta Period, Dandikas were the highest ranked police officers. Chauro, Dhanmika and Dandaparika were other police officers under Dandikas.¹³ Nagar Shreshthi was responsible for peace and security of the city, Rabasika or Rahasaga was in charge of the secret and confidential service.¹⁴

The criminal justice system developed during this period continued for five to six hundred year with only one difference in Mauryan and Gupta period. The administration system during Mauryan time was centralized while it was more decentralized during the Gupta period. However, its police was nearly the same. The village police, the city police and the palace police were the basic systems which was suitably developed or changed by various Kings. Failure of duty towards society was taken very seriously. Any person who failed to render assistance according to his ability in the prevention of crime would be banished with his goods and chattel.¹⁵ Double punishment was prescribed for those who fail to give assistance to one calling for help though they happen to be on the spot or who run away after being approached for help.¹⁶ Right of self-defence existed during ancient India. A person had a right to oppose and kill another not only in self-defence but also in

defence of women and weak persons who were not in position to defend themselves against a murderous or violent attack

Conclusion

The main function of police in ancient times was to maintain Law and order in society and preventing and detecting of crime. The prime characteristic of ancient police system was that the police was more community-oriented. The police personnel provide for the security of people and enforcement of laws of the country. The assurance of equality and dignity to the weaker sections of the society was also dependent upon the performance of the police. Clearly, police had a crucial role in the existence and well-being of the common men in India from very ancient times. The police which we see today, has its roots in the very foundation of the state and passing various phases of history, it has evolved to its present status as a specialized agency without which even in a democracy like India, the rulers can not imagine to run the state.

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