

Gems in Indian Kings Courts (Special Emphasis on Vikramāditya's Court)

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Abstract

India has held a monarchical form of government for many millennia. What were some of the internal factors of governance which dictated who was going to be an effective ruler? Is it true that some courts of kings had 'gems or advisors that were so accomplished that they shaped the destiny of the kingdom?' This paper searches through the history of India to determine if having the proper advisors, experts, learned scholars, and renowned philosophers was one of the prime factors which determined the success or failure of a monarchy in India. It will determine some examples that stand out in this regard, and also focus on the much talked about Nine Gems in the court of King Vikramāditya; the King of Ujjain, who ruled in India about 2000 or more years ago.

Full Paper

India has held a monarchical form of government for many millennia, up until its independence in 1947. Many monarchies were very successful in governing its populace, and some created utopian times that are still talked about, and have significantly impacted history. There were also many monarchies that did not reach their desired goals, and were lacking in performance, based on some common indexes of measure. It is indeed puzzling that some monarchs were widely popular and created a long chain of over-achieving descendants, versus many others who failed miserably and caused chaos and strife throughout their reign, excluding outside forces such as outside invasions, famines, plagues, etc. What were some of the internal factors of governance which dictated who was going to be an effective ruler? Is it true that some courts of kings had 'gems or advisors that were so accomplished that they shaped the kingdom's destiny? This paper will study the effect these advisors had on the monarch's success.

One thing that was consistent among many monarchs in Indian history, was that the monarch was guided by a group of wise folks, who were experts in their respective fields, whether it was the field of understanding and dispensing of law, Music, Sciences, Astronomy, warfare, education, etc. The king had a council of ministers to keep him in check, and prevent his personal biases from interfering with the dispensing of justice. Of course, the king had supreme power, and could overrule his ministers. While this would happen in some cases, the King was usually mindful of appearing too irrational and unfair. In many kingdoms within India, both during ancient times, and in the recent past, following 'dharma' or following the rule of law based on the guiding principle of 'doing the right thing' was respected to a great length. Even the king could not transcend Dharma - the rule of law based on righteousness.

The king typically had a council of ministers, and it was understood that the king and the council of ministers were afraid of each other, and they vetted each other's decisions. Both the king and the Council of ministers were in turn afraid of what the people thought about them, and were constantly striving to keep the public happy, reward the people when they displayed good conduct, and dispense justice by being fair, impartial, and punishing those who broke the law.

1. Ancient References to Council of Ministers

The Mahabharata explains the importance of selecting exceptional persons for the position of Council of Ministers, in one of its sets of verses,

“Oh Rajan! Take care that your ministers should be men well-versed in the Śāstra of politics and the application of the six *guṇas*: noble birth, devout, bereft of faults, good politicians, clever lawyers, and learned in history. They must be skilled to read the unwritten signs and intentions like an open book. They must fully know what should be done and when. They must be heroic and strong. They must be well-born and well-bred, keen witted, and must succeed in all works that they undertake. They must be experts in the art of warfare and in the strengthening of forts in order to make them impregnable. They must be deeply learned in the Dharmasāstras, they must be broadminded and show mercy in situations that elicit it. They must be wise, endowed with foresight and must command the wisdom to circumvent all future dangers and must have the inner strength to face and subdue the present threats. They must keenly anticipate the motives of their foes and friends alike. More vitally, they must learn how to deal with indifferent and lazy kings who act purposelessly and must guard their secrets, standing firm like rocks. O King! These ministers must be strictly Dharmic, generous and immune to all temptations. In a word, such ministers are strong and fit, like patient cows, to bear the burden of the state upon their backs.”

Now the date of the occurrence of Mahabharata is still being figured out, but we believe that the 6th millennium BCE is a likely date. In which case, the often-quoted Greek civilization being the birthplace of democracy, and culture, and other characteristics of a developed civilization, is a claim that would be challenged by this kind of advanced civilization in India, about 4 millennia before the Greek Civilization. Kautilya’s Arthasāstra, a manual from the early part of the First millennium BCE, suggests that for a King to be successful in running his kingdom, he has to be surrounded by a group of capable ministers.

During the Vedic age, as mentioned in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, according to J. Gonda, *ratnins* were ‘important persons belonging to the entourage of the ruler, were by their specific relations to the divine being considered able to enhance the ruler’s power or potency in various respects’. So, these *Ratnins* were more than the traditional council of ministers, since they were considered higher beings. The Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā calls them ‘limbs of the ruling power’ and the king regards the *Ratnins* as ‘sustainers of his realm’.

2. Number of Ministers

The number of ministers in the king's council was variable. Some kings had *Navaratnas* (nine gems) as did Vikramāditya and Rājā Krishnachandra, some like Krishna Deva Raya had *Ashtadiggajas* (eight scholars), Lakshmana Sena had *Pancharatnas* (five gems) and *Ashtapradhānas* (eight chiefs) as in the case of Shivaji.

3. Famous Minister : Kauṭilya (Cāṇakya)

He was a polymath - his knowledge spanned a lot of diverse subjects. He was a well-recognized scholar and intellectual, and he closely followed Alexander and his conquests all the way from Greece to India, and became concerned about the upcoming safety and security of India. He set a strategic plan in motion, and befriended Chandragupta Maurya, a member of the Maurya royal family who was out of favor with the kingdom. Chandragupta was a student of Kauṭilya’s at the world famous Takshashilā University. He guided Chandragupta to defeat the ruling Maurya king, and through treaty and wars with neighboring kingdoms, he helped him create a large kingdom east of the Indus river. They then defeated the large wave of Greek invasions into India by Selucus who was a commander of Alexander’s army and had inherited his kingdoms. Kautilya’s book on *Niti-shāstra*, which is a brilliant work on select quotes for life’s many situations, is widely quoted and used even today, some three thousand years after it was written.

Kauṭilya's Arthashāstra is a masterpiece book which covers knowledge on statecraft, political science and economic policies of a state. His approach in this book of political science can be summed up in this statement. 'The highest morality for the king was the prosperity of his people and his kingdom, and the methods to achieve this were not subject to ethical criticism.'

4. Chandragupta's Navaratnas or Nine Gems

Chandragupta II, also known as Vikramāditya, ruled over North India in c. 380–c. 415 ce. He is known for developing India very successfully and creating the legacy of 9 gems in court. The famous 9 gems are referred to 9 courtiers serving the king in court, each designated to their own role. This array of courtiers is later mimicked by King Akbar, Raja Krishna Chandra, and others.

The 9 gems of King Vikramāditya, referred to as his *Navratnas*, consist of the following people.

1. Chandragupta's first gem was Kālidāsa, a well-known writer and poet throughout North India, famous for his work based on the Rāmayaṇa, Mahābhārata, and the Vedas/Purāṇas. He had written three plays; Abhijnānashākuntalam narrating the story of King Dushyanta and Shakuntalā, Mālavikāgnimitram narrating the love between King Agnimitra and Malavikā, and Vikramorvasīyam narrating the story of King Pururavas and the fairy Urvashi. He also wrote the two poems Raghuvamṣa and Kumārasambhava. Besides this he wrote two shorter poems which are not mentioned here.
2. Chandragupta's second gem was Vetāla Bhatta. Vetāla Bhatta was a Brahmin who is majorly known for writing a sixteen-stanza essay called "Niti Pradipa". It is also believed that he also owns the work of "Vetālapancaviṃshatikā", even though it is found in the text "Guṇāḍhya's Brhatkathā"
3. Chandragupta's third gem is Varāhamihira, the eldest out of the nine gems. Varāhamihira was an extraordinary Indian astronomer, astrologer and mathematician of Gupta era. Mainly known for his great work, "Pañca Siddhāntika"; a book on mathematical astronomy, another contribution of his is the "Bṛhat-Saṃhitā," an encyclopedia of astrology and other relevant subjects, filled with verses which make up more than 100 chapters. His last work is "Bhrajātakam," another encyclopedia revolving around astronomy.
4. Chandragupta's fourth gem is Vararuchi. He has written "Patrakaumudi" from directions of King Vikramāditya himself. A stanza of his work is attached below.

Vikramāditya-bhūpasya Kīrti-siddhēnīdeśataḥ |

Śrīman Vararuchirdhīmān tanoti Patrakaumudīm ||

He has also written "Līṅgavishesavidhi" and "Vidyā-Sundara-Prasaṅga-kāvyaṃ".

5. Chandragupta's fifth gem was Amarasimha. Amarasimha was a major writer and had written 19 books, but every single piece of his work was lost but one. The maintained piece of writing is a Sanskrit thesaurus, "Amarakosha", widely known, and also called "Nāmaliṅgānushāsana" or "Trikaṇḍī". This is the oldest Sanskrit dictionary preserved and is sectioned into three chapters (Kāṇḍas.; The first chapter is named "Svargādi-khaṇḍa" (heavens and gods), second is "Bhuvahādi-khaṇḍa" (earth), and the last chapter is "Samanyadi-khaṇḍa" (grammar and miscellaneous words).
6. Chandragupta's sixth gem is Dhanvantari, one of the world's first surgeons and medical specialists in the Gupta era. It is believed by many that he rediscovered the methods of Āyurveda and a contrary belief is also that he is a reincarnation of Viṣṇu himself. The

author of “Sushruta Saṁhitā,” a medical text with 186 chapters; all about diseases and remedies, was the disciple of Dhanvantari. Credit is given to him for researching the healing properties of turmeric and the beneficial properties of salt. Lastly, he is also credited for inventing plastic surgery and executing this process throughout his time.

7. Chandragupta’s seventh gem was Kṣapaṇaka. In the Gupta era, there was Kṣapaṇaka and Mahakṣapaṇaka. They are different people but sometimes confused. Kṣapaṇaka, who was placed as one of the Nine gems in King Vikramaditya's court, was a poet and a writer. It is rumored that he wrote “Dvātrīṁsikā / Dvātrīshatika”, but the original author of the text is truly unknown. This Sanskrit story talks about King Vikramāditya and his rule throughout the golden age that he ruled over.
8. Chandragupta’s eighth gem, Shanku, is yet unidentified. The reason for this is that he isn't mentioned in many authors' writings from that time. All we know about him is that he was a man interested in geography. Unfortunately, there is nothing that remains of his work and no primary documents stating his existence beyond being one of the *Navaratnas*.
9. Chandragupta’s ninth gem was Ghaṭakarpura, a poet in the royal court of Vikramāditya. Just like a few others, a lot of his work was lost, but one of his pieces still remain, his 22 verses from Ghaṭakarparakāvya and Yamaka Kāvya.

5. Conclusion

The golden periods of Indian history happened due to the sharing of power by the monarch, with accomplished ministers, who helped usher in peace, prosperity, justice, skill, etc. Even though it was a monarchy, the presence of democracy-like power sharing structures, with input from various experts made for a very prosperous and utopian kingdom. This hybrid version of monarchical and democratic form of government, also led to advancements in the fields of astronomy, astrology, medical science and surgery, language development, architecture, music, dances, metallurgy, etc. This is in sharp contrast to autocratic monarchs who ruled based on a whim and did not seek the advice of learned men, and sometimes caused chaos in their kingdom.

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