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## **Ministry in Ancient India: Its Origin and Duties**

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Ministers formed an integral part of administration in ancient India even though there was a monarchical form of government with the king concentrating all the powers of the state in his own hands. Central administration was conducted by the king only with the assistance of a number of ministers or Officers-of-the State. Ministry which was popularly known as the Council of Advisers was next in importance to the king. In fact an all-round king can't know everything as different people possess different attitudes. It is because of this the king was always in need of wise, competent and brave ministers in order to avoid the destruction of his kingdom. Ministry in ancient India therefore used to form an organic part of the Government. Great importance has been attached to the selection of ministers in ancient literature."Government" says Kautilya "Can be carried only with the Assistance of others. A single wheel does not move. Therefore, the king should appoint ministers and act according to their advice ". On their importance Mahabharata says that, "The king is as vitally dependent upon the ministers as animals are upon the clouds, Brahmanas on the Vedas and women upon their husbands". These statements clearly show that the ministers were simply an inseparable part of government.

### **Origin of the Council of Ministers or Ministry in Ancient India**

The Vedas appear to be completely silent on the existence of any ministry during the Vedic Period. Neither the Rig Veda nor the other three Vedas mention about the formation of any council of Ministers by a king throughout the early and later Vedic period though the names of various kings and their kingdoms are widely mentioned in Vedic literature. This clearly indicates that there was no such concept of appointing ministers by the kings of Vedic period. It was perhaps due to the existence of small kingdoms and absence of such an idea. But the Samhitas, Atharva Veda and the Brahmana literature certainly give us an idea about the presence of some



kind of High Functionaries better known as Ratnins (Jewels) in the later Vedic Period who unitedly used to form the King's Council. It proves that even in those days the kings realized the necessity of assistance for shaping and regulating the administration of the State. The only difference was perhaps they did not call it their Ministry. These Ratnins generally consisted of mostly royal relatives, departmental heads and courtiers. Among the departmental heads who were considered as the Ratnins were Senani (Commander-in –Chief of the Army), Suta(Charioteer), Gramani (Chief of the Village Headmen), Askavapa (Superintendent if Dice), Bhagaduka (Collector of Taxes), Samgrahitri (Treasurer), Kshatri (Chief Chamberlain) and others. Apart from these Purohita(Royal Priest),Rajanya (Noble) and Mahishi (Chief Queen) also figured in the Council of Ratnins. There is also reference to the existence of Navaratnas (Nine Jewels) in the later Vedic Period in the courts of some ancient Indian kings.but ultimately the concept of appointing Ratnins appears fading away with the passage of time.

As change is the unchanging law of the nature the administration of states in ancient India also started changing with the passage of time. Both the Dharmasutra and Nitishastra literature are unanimous in their opinion that the Ratnins disappeared by leaving behind a more efficient body to discharge the functions of the State called the Council of Ministers or Mantri Parishad. However the credit of appointing a permanent Council of Ministers always goes to Chandragupta Maurya. As an administrator he was the pioneer of many things in India. He created a full-fledged ministry with 18 different ministers and a Prime Minister and became an ideal for others. He made all the ministers head of specific departments and with clearly defined purposes. With Kautilya as his Prime Minister his administration appeared more sound on organized on a scientific basis.after Chandragupta almost all the ancient rulers went on appointing ministers for the smooth functioning of the State. Even the Saka , who are regarded as foreigners seems to have ruled with the assistance of a council of Mati-Sachivas (Councillors) and Karma Sachivas (Administrative Heads of Various Departments). Ministers or Mantris figured widely in Gupta inscriptions. Kalhana in his Rarajtarangini also specially mentions about the important role paled by the ministers in the internal and external administration of Kashmir.

### **Important Duties of the Council of Ministers**



Behind the screen ministers were the actual administrators of the State as they not only conducted the affairs of their individual departments but also acted like the medium between the king and his subjects. On none side they acted like checks on the autocratic powers of the king and on the other hand they maintained a perfect balance of power by looking after the demands of the public in general. Following are the few important duties of the ministers in general apart from their individual duties

1. To aid and advise the king in matters relating to the welfare of the State
2. To formulate the external and internal policies of the State
3. To enunciate new policies
4. To ensure the successful working of various state policies
5. To remove difficulties on the path of smooth administration of the State
6. To supervise and direct the State policy regarding the income and expenditure of the State
7. To direct the foreign policy of the state in a proper manner
8. To suggest the names of competent officers to be appointed in the bureaucracy to the king
9. To take steps for the proper education and training of the Crown-Prince and other Princes
10. To arrange and participate in the coronation ceremony of the new king
11. To ensure the safety of the state from external and internal enemies
12. To stand by the king at difficult circumstances
13. To work for the welfare of the state and its people

Apart from the above-mentioned duties each minister being the head of individual departments was given separate responsibility as per the requirement of the king and the State. They all were responsible to the king as all of them enjoyed their office only during the pleasure of the king .King alone had the power to appoint and remove them and for that ht eking was absolutely not answerable to anyone.

### **Strength of the Ministry**



There is a great deal of confusion regarding the size or strength of the Ministry. even today our Indian constitution does not provide of actual number of ministers to ne appointed by the Prime Minister at Centre and Chief Ministers in States. Much depends upon the requirements of the State and the wish of Prime Minister or Chief Ministers. All that our constitution says with regard to the size of cabinet is that the Prime Minister should appoint 18 to 22 Cabinet Ministers. But in ancient days there was no such separate rank of ministers like Cabinet, State and Deputy Ministers. The difference in those days was in rank and status of a minister. Ancient literature does give contradictory remarks regarding the strength of the Ministry. So far as the size of the ministry is concerned both Kautilya and Manu appear to be unanimous in their opinion that the actual number of ministers should depend upon the needs of the situation in a specific state as situation and need vary from one country to the other. They are of the opinion that if the State is small then four and five ministers would be enough and if the state is a bigger one then the king should determine the size of his ministry accordingly. This seems to be a very sound opinion as the statement is even valid now-a-days.in those days when Chandragupta Maurya appointed Nineteen Ministers including the Prime Minister it was because the Maurya Empire was much bigger compared to others and even bigger in size compared to present India. But Mahabharata firmly says that the strength should always be Eight (08) irrespective of the population and size of the kingdom concerned. While Sukra , a writer of Sukraniti says that the strength of the Ministry should be Ten (10). All these above statements regarding the strength of the Ministry proves that there was no general rule regarding the size of the ministry and it was up to the king to decide how many ministers should be appointed for the larger benefit of the State and for running smoothly the administration.

Sukra in his Sukraniti has described in detail the role and qualifications of ten different ancient Indian ministers who were mostly found in majority of states irrespective of their sizes. The names of ministers Sukra has mentioned and their departments were common throughout the ancient period. Apart from the names mentioned by Sukra many other kings also appointed different ministers keeping in view if their requirements. Let us first discuss



the role and qualifications of ancient ministers described in Sukraniti. Following are the ten different ministers mentioned in Sukraniti :

1. Purohita (Royal Priest)
2. Pratinidhi (Representative)
3. Pradhan (Prime Minister)
4. Sachiva/ Senapati (Commander-in Chief of the Army)
5. Mantrin (Foreign Minister)
6. Pradvivaka (Chief Justice)
7. Pandita (Minister in-charge of Religious Affairs)
8. Sumantra (Minister in Charge of Treasury)
9. Amtya(Revenue Minister)
10. Duta (Ambassador)

The status and pay of each succeeding minister was lower than those of the proceeding one. This means Purohita was the most powerful and respected minister and the Duta was the least powerful and therefore used to receive lower salary compared to Purohita and all other ministers.

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