THE HOLD OF THE MANTRINS ON

THE KING THROUGH THE AGES
The Ancient Indian works not only inform us about the existence of the minister from the very early time but also to their role in moulding the course of history in ancient India. Though the ministers were not invested with any constitutional power in ancient India but there are various references to indicate that they were powerful members of the government and exercised a considerable check on king's authority. The position and power of the ministers varied from time to time and depended mostly on their personality as well as on the personality of their king. This explains why the constitutional writers have described the State in three different ways, 'when the kings were powerful enough, they were the centers of power and the administration was known as Rājāyattantra; when the rulers were not strong and capable, the ministers became the virtual rulers then the administration was known as Sachivyattantra. However, when the powers were shared equally by the ministers and the king equally the administration was known as Ubbhāyattantra'.

We do not possess any information about the existence of ministers during theṚgvedic age. It is
assumed that the functions of the ministers were performed by the Ṛṣi. In the Ṛṣveda the Ṛṣi is described as a powerful agency who maintains the welfare of the king and the people. We find that king Sudās had a powerful Ṛṣi named Visvāmitra who was later on removed from his position and the king appointed Vasīṣṭha at his place. Visvāmitra could not tolerate it and strengthened his relations with the neighbouring kings which ultimately led to the battle of ten kings.

Though we do not get the names of powerful Ṛṣis who played an important role in the later Vedic age, the inclusion of the Ṛṣi among the Ratnag in almost all the Brāhmaṇical texts who have been described as the best counsellor of the kingdom, shows that he continued to exercise a great check on king's authority.

A study of the Rāmāyaṇa reveals that the ministers generally tried their best to please their master. But contrary to it they did not submit themselves to the wishes of the ruler. It was the foremost duty of the minister to restrain him going astray and to do what was beneficial to the king. Vālmiki recommends death punishment to the minister who did not prevent a king from following an evil path. On the other hand the king was required to listen to the advice of the ministers though,
constitutionally not bound to do so. We learn from the *Ramāvāna* that the king Dasaratha behaved humbly toward his ministers. He used to consult his ministers on all important matters of the kingdom. So much so we find that Dasaratha consulted his ministers on the proposed consecration of his son Rāma as the crown prince of Ayodhyā. Hanumān is said to have reminded his master Sugrīva about the neglect of duty towards Rāma.\(^5\) But there are certain references to show that the condition was altogether different under a monarch who was not ready to listen any argumentation. The ministers found it difficult to discharge their duties honestly under a self-willed ruler like Rāvana, who sometimes, insulted and threatened them to death.\(^6\)

The *Mahābhārata* states that the king should follow the advice of his ministers for the prosperity of the kingdom. Vidura critically remarks that as a sick man does not like food, as a bad woman cannot be brought to the right path even in the house of Sugrīva by good advice, as a woman in her youth dislikes her old husband likewise the unrighteous king does not follow the advice of the ministers.\(^7\)

Generally, the king followed the advice of his ministers during the *Mahābhārata* age, but it was not binding upon the king. It is laid down that the king should not follow the advice of ministers
before examining it properly. Like the Rāmāyaṇa the Mahābhārata also maintains that the king sometime did not accept the good advice of their ministers and dismissed them. We find that Dhūtarāṣṭra did not accept the advice of Vidura for offering due share to the Pāṇḍavas, and expelled him. Similarly king Nala refused to accept the advice of his ministers.

But under the weak and incapable king, the ministers became more and more powerful and ultimately usurped the throne. The Mahābhārata tells us that Mahākārṇi the minister of king Ambuvīcha of Magadha was such a minister who due to the prolonged illness of his master declared himself as king and dishonoured the latter. In a nutshell we can say that under normal circumstances there existed cordial relations between the king and the ministers. The king was expected to pay due respect to the ministers.

From the Pāṇḍanjali Jātaka we come to know that the ministers were very powerful and they could successfully veto the accession of the heir apparent. The position and influence of the ministers on the
authority of the king becomes more and more clear from the 6th Century onwards. King Bimbisarwa is said to have a number of ministers who were expected to give him sound advice. We learn that the king had dismissed some of the Mahāmāttas, who advised him badly, degraded some other with whose counsel he was not satisfied and promoted those whose advice he approved. Traditions have it that the king Udayana had a powerful and influential minister named Yaugundharāyana who played a great role in inspiring his master for diplomatic marriages with the contemporary kings. The marriage of Padvāvati, the daughter of Dardaka the king of Megadha was due to the intrigues of his minister. This marriage resulted in strengthening the relations between two contemporary powers which ultimately increased the sphere of Udayana’s power.

Prasendit was a contemporary of Udayana who always relied upon the advice of his ministers, Srivrdhā and Mrgadhara in carrying out the important scheme of the government. Viḍudabhā who was Prasendit’s son is said to have dethroned his father and occupied the throne with the help of ministers. Viḍudabhā had a chief minister named Ambrīsa.

At the same time Magadha was being ruled
by another powerful king named Ajātāsatru. We learn that success achieved by Ajātāsatru in subduing the Vajjisāmgha was all due to the diplomacy and manipulation of Vassākāra.\(^{15}\) We are informed that Ajātāsatru invaded the Vajjisāmgha, but he found it difficult to defeat them. At this moment Vassākāra helped him. He suddenly fled to the Vajjī capital giving out that he had merely escaped his life from Ajātāsatru. In this way, he restored to intrigues and created dissension in the enemy's camp through spies. At last the Vajjī's were considerably weakened and defeated by Ajātāsatru.

The role played by Chāṇakya in destroying the Nandas is a unique example in the history of India. It was all due to his vigorous diplomacy. He later on installed Chandragupta Maurya and became his Prime minister. Bhāradvāja\(^ {16}\) quoted by Kauṭilya attaches great importance to the ministers and says that the ministerial debacle was the greatest calamity which could fall upon a king. Kauṭilya also states that the king should accept the majority decision of the council.\(^ {17}\)

The Dāvyāvadāna informs us that Khallātaka with the help of other ministers took up the cause
of Aśoka and wanted to make him king even against the wishes of the king, Bindusāra who desired Susūma to be his successor, but his ministers did not agree with him. We are informed that the ministers created dissatisfaction in the distant province of Takṣaśila. Consequently, the people revolted against the provincial government; Susūma was sent to subdue the revolt but did not succeed in that, ultimately it was suppressed by Aśoka. We are told that after the death of Bindusāra Aśoka was able to secure the throne of Magadha with the help of Khāḷāṭaka and Rādhaṅgupta. This shows that the ministers played a great role in the politics of that period and exercised much influence on the authority of the king. 18

The Divyāvadāha 19 provides us ample evidence to show that the council of minister had immense power during that period. It becomes clear from the story how Aśoka was not allowed by the Council of Ministers to make further gifts to the Buddhist sangha for the construction of Kukkuṭārāma monastery. We learn that ministers approached the heir apparent and told that the king was making gifts to the Buddhist saṅgha which would ultimately empty the treasury in due course of time, because the strength of the king lies in the treasury therefore
he should be checked from making more gifts to the Buddhist Samgha. On this the heir apparent instructed the treasurer not to give more money to the emperor for the Samgha. At this action Asoka got annoyed and called upon a meeting of the council along with the Pauras and asked them who the sovereign was? On this Radhagupta stood from his seat and replied that he (Asoka) was the sovereign! Asoka with tears in his eyes spoke to the ministers not to tell a lie for the sake of the country. He was aware of the fact that he (Asoka) was being deprived off his sovereignty.

The powers of the ministers were vast and the king was not in a capacity to alter the resolution can be gauged from the evidence of Mālvikāgñimitra. We learn that the council of ministers decided the Vidarbha issue without prior permission from the king. The king's opinion is sought by the Chief minister through the Chamberlain but he is not informed about the council's decision at this stage. 'If the king's opinion on this issue coincides with that of the council the Chamberlain says, 'Victory to Your Majesty' My Lord, the Prime minister says 'Happy is your Majesty's idea' such is the view of the ministers also. After knowing this the king says 'tell the cabinet then to send a despatch to general Vīrasena to this effect'.
The Junagadh inscription\(^{21}\) speaks of Suviaakha the minister of Rudrādaman I. The Mahākshatrapa wanted money for the repair of Sudarṣāna lake but his Council of Minister did not sanction him. We are informed that Mahākshatrapa had to spend the amount from his privy purse. This shows that the Council of Ministers was very powerful and kept a close watch over the activities of the king. The council continued to flourish during the period of Sakas also. But the Gupta records do not give us any information about the Council of Ministers. However, the Allahabad Pillar Inscription\(^{22}\) gives us the name of Harisēna who was a Sāndhivigrahika, Kumārāṃtya and Mahādandanāyaka. Udayagiri cave inscription\(^{23}\) tells us about Viśesena another minister. Prthvīsena was a minister under Kumāragupta I, while his father, Sīkharāsvamin was under Chandragupta II.\(^{24}\) These ministers and many others played their role in expanding the Gupta empire.

Kāmandaka also enjoins upon the ministers to check him (the king) from following an evil path. He lays down that the Mantrasākti was more powerful than the Utsāha and Prabhavasākti as well as the power of the arms. The Harsa Charita\(^{25}\) tells us that Bhandi was the Chief minister who was very closely related to royal family. The same source informs us that all the ministers held a meeting to discuss the matter about Harsa's accession. We learn that Bhandi said to the
ministers 'The destiny of the nation is to be fixed today..... Because he is attached to his family, the people will trust in him. I propose that he should assume the royal authority. Let each one give his opinion on the matter, whatever they think'. After their discussion the Prime minister Bhandi spoke to Harṣa.

'The opinion of the people as evident from their songs, proves their real submission to your qualities. Reign then with glory over the lands'. Avanti was probably the war minister during the time of Harṣa.

Hiuen Tsang narrates the story of a king Vikramāditya of Sravasti. One day the king ordered his ministers to distribute daily five lakhs of gold coins. The treasurer had a fear that the treasury will be emptied and said to the king, 'your treasury will thus be emptied, and then fresh imports will have to be laid, until the resources of the land be also exhausted, then the voice of complaint will be heard and hostility be provoked. Your majesty, indeed will get credit for charity, but your ministers will lose the respect of all'. This indicates that the ministers had some sort of responsibility towards the subjects also.
The Nalanda inscription tells us about the king Yasovarman the king of Kanauj and his minister Margapati. The Council of Ministers continued to exercise influence even in the post Harsha period. It is evident from the inscription that Malada, the son of Margapati, made a land grant to the Buddhists at Nalanda. 'The essence of the constitution as sketched in the *Sukranitigara* is that the king had absolutely no power in his own and sole law. All administrative functions were vested in the council.'

Sukra is of the opinion that the ministers should be powerful enough to control the king. They must not be merely the kinsmen. He, further, adds that the ministers who do not keep the king under their control are merely like women with ornaments.

Ministers continued to maintain a good deal of authority under the Rāstrakūta rulers. Narayana the foreign minister of Kṛṣṇa III has been described in the Salotgi inscription as dear to him as his right hand. The Pathārīl inscription of foundatory Rāstrakūta chief parabala states that he used to regard his premier as worthy of salutation by his own head. A record of king Kṛṣṇa of the Yādava dynasty compares his ministers to his own tongue and right hand. During the Rāstrakūta period the
ministers were very much desirous for the prosperity of the kingdom. The grant of Govinda III which is slightly later in period than the Rastrakūta has the following: "When Chandradeva was the good premier, the nation flourished, subjects and allies were content, religion increased, all aims were attained the wise were happy and prosperity was visible everywhere."

Even under the Chauhanas we find a number of ministers who moulded the course of history. We are told that when Prthvīrajā II died without leaving any son, the ministers brought Somesvara from Gujarat and installed on the throne of Ajmer. On his death they made the widowed queen, Karpuradevi the regent for her minor son Prthvīrajā. During the regency period, Kadambavasa known as Kaimara was the chief minister. We learn that he presided over a discussion of two well known Jaina scholars Padma Prabha and Jinapatisuri. Another minister was Bhuvanaikamalla who was younger brother of Karpuradevi's father Achalaraja. During the Chauhana period although most of the kings depended upon the advice of the ministers but sometimes the king did not follow the advice of the ministers. The king Vigraharaja IV for instance, rejected the advice of Śridhara and Arjpraja that of his experienced ministers.
The Rejatarangini provides us historical instances showing the great power wielded by the ministers. We learn that the deposition of Ajayapida was due to the decree of his ministers Mamma and others. Sūra became king, because it was decided by the ministry and he was found to be most qualified for it. King Kalasa could not inaugurate his son Harṣa as Yuvarāja owing to the opposition of the ministry.

According to Somadāva Suri the king was bound to follow the dictates of the council, otherwise, he will cease to be a king in the eyes of the constitutional law. Owing to the high responsibilities the ministers in ancient India were expected to lead a very simple life. Kautilya is of the opinion that a minister should not live in a luxurious style. In the Mudrarakshasa Kautilya himself is described as living in an old and dilapidated hut. But it appears that all the ministers were not honest. Some of them happen to be greedy. Kautilya says, 'the treasurer general appropriates to himself the money which is paid into the treasury by others; the collector general fills
his own pockets first and then collects revenue for the king, or destroys the revenues collected and takes other people's property at his pleasure. Some ministers were bad and oppressive and gave bad advice to the king. 

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