

Background – Gupta Simulation

Decentralization and devolution of power

The honorific bestowed upon the Gupta emperors leave no doubt as to their belief in the Brahmanic notions of kingship.¹² The king's right was divinely ordained and was sanctified by the ceremonies that the *brahmins* performed on his behalf; his right was only valid as long as he followed a righteous policy toward his subjects. As the *Markandeya Purana* put it, 'a king inaugurated in his kingdom must in the first place conciliate his subjects, without obstructing his own duty.'¹³ The Gupta emperors kept to the letter and spirit of this understanding.¹⁴ Instead of governing by absolutist principle, they followed the *rajadharma*, the duty of kings to protect their subjects and to arbitrate disputes. They also initiated certain changes in the very style of exercise of monarchical authority. For nearly a thousand years the Indian monarchs, whether imperial or regional, had aimed at a concentration of all power in their hands. Absolutist rulers were tempted to subdue provinces and regions their will through their bureaucracies; and the Mauryans [the preceding empire to the Guptas] were perhaps the greatest of centralizers. The Gupta dominions were organized on a somewhat different model, the main difference being the principle of decentralized administration.¹⁵ The Guptas consciously devolved power on a variety of people and authorities who were then brought together in a circle of friendship and homage. Instead of bolstering a bureaucratic hierarchy, they helped to develop political hierarchies. This trend could be noticed in the power structures operating in the centuries immediately after the Mauryas, but the Guptas developed it further. To appreciate this model of decentralization more fully it is necessary to peruse carefully the deeds of Samudragupta as narrated in the inscription of the Allahabad pillar. Samudragupta did not wish to vanquish his enemies merely for his own gratification. After defeating them he permitted most of them to keep their domains within the empire. They were to be protected by him, while he would share their wealth. What he was developing was a form of contract between the tributary kings and himself as overlord. This arrangement did not work for weaker Gupta emperors of the sixth century, but during the heyday of Gupta power in the fourth and fifth centuries it functioned extremely well and helped to keep peace among the various ruling families. The post-Gupta rulers in future centuries would also, in measure of their capabilities, adopt the model of tributary rulership.

Burjor Avari, *India: The Ancient Past*, New York: Routledge, 2007, 158-59.