

# Democratic Institutions In Ancient India

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**Abstract:** The prevalent system of government in ancient India was probably absolute monarchy. The ancient Indian system was a monarchical one, as it was administered by kings. Ancient India had a centralized government that controlled its citizens. Eventually, the king would become an all-powerful monarch in the Ancient Society. Ancient Indian political system was a mix of monarchical States, and non-monarchical States that had both oligarchic and republican governments, which had been documented by both Indian and Greek writers. In all democracies, an assembly of elected representatives exercises supreme political authority on behalf of the people. In India such a national assembly of elected representatives is called Parliament. At the state level this is called Legislature or Legislative Assembly.

**Index Terms** - Democratic, Institutions, government, political system, Monarchy.Kingship

## I. INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this article is to throw considerable amount of light on gross roots of democracy in ancient India. In the remote past, even much more before growing of plants of democracy in western world, democratic machineries were functioning well in our political system. In fact, India could well be considered to have been the first cradle of democracy on the whole of world. Indian polity had always been a sort of federal or confederal. Even before entering of Aryans (who were rather immigrants than conquerors), in Dravidian local tribal political organizations, we see some names of tribal kings like susna, kuyava, sambara, Arbuda, Varnaya etc. In fact, all these tribal kings had sovereign powers in them and ruled their territories. Famous philosopher Hegel while writing of his philosophy of history states, 'Persia the land of light, Rome the land of empire, Greece the land of grace, India the land of dreams.

The prime importance of state and king ship had been discussed at some great length in our ancient Vedas, Smrits, Dharmasastras, Epics, Arthashastra of koutilya, Kamandakaneetisaara, in the writings of Gowtama, Manu, yagnavalkya, Narada, Parasara, Manollasa of Someshwara etc. various forms and functions of democracy had been very well advocated and narrated as Quintessence of Rajadharma. Indo Aryans entered India about 1600-1400 BC. They brought with them a tribal organization that was based on Vis and Jana, which got slowly transformed into a territorial organization comprising of Gramas and Rastras. The Indo-Aryan society was as depicted in Rigvedawas Patriarchal, but kingship was generally elective. The vedic Gana was probably in the nature of a tribal democracy looking after military, distributive, religious and social activities. The word Gana means number, the Ganarajya (the rule of number) or the rule of many. The word Gana so be equated with the word demos and the word Ganarajya with democracy or republic. Gana was also the assembly or parliament. Gana also came to mean a republic itself.

Women were member of Sabha and Samiti, women were teachers, they were learning education in Gurukulas, they had property rights, men and women were equal in many important fields. Rigveda enjoined the entire people to get together to set up a strong Rajasabha with persons of every section of society.

In ancient polity kings are bound by Rajadharma. The character of equality is found incorporated in the Rigveda the most ancient of the Vedas and also in the Atharva veda. Rigveda, mandala 5, sukta 60, mantra 5 says “no one is superior or inferior. All are brothers, all should strive for the interest of all and should progress collectively”. Rigveda mandala 10, sukta 191, mantra 4 syas “let there be oneness in your resolutions, in hearts and minds. Let the strength to live with manual co-operation be firm in you all” Atharvaveda samjanaisukta says “All have equal rights in articles of food and water. The yoke of the chariot of life is placed equally on the shoulders of all. All should live together with harmony, supporting one another like the spokes of a wheel of the chariot connecting its rim and the hub”<sup>3</sup>. In Rigveda BK X 124 and BK X 173. I, we are told that “the VIS choose the king, while Athrvaveda BK115.7 mentions that, a group of men called the king makers or Rajakritas and Gramains were electing king”<sup>4</sup>. In the early vedic age the king was chosen by the people but as the age advanced king was chosen by the Gramanis, Rajakrits and then accepted by the people. When king was accepted by all, then he consulted the Samiti and Sabha. Sabha seems council of elders and influentials and Samiti seems assembly of the people.

These Vedic provisions advocate equality among human beings. There were classes not castes in Rigveda. By virtue, alone people of different classes had held high positions. By the instance of Vishwamitra who was not born into the priestly class and yet became a priest. This is again true in the case of Devapi. Further it is not priest alone who were the composers of vedas, but they were princes too, women too, vitahavya is said to have composed BK V115, Sindhuvipa BKX 133, Mandhatri BK X 133, Pruthuvainya BK X 148. A renowned women scholar of Rigvedic period by name vishwawara of Atri family had composed sukta 28th of 5th mandala of Rigveda. Another name, Ghosha’s daughter of kakshivana had composed sukta 29 and 30 of mandala 10. In addition to this Indrani, Sachi, Apala, shashiyani<sup>6</sup> also composed some mantras of Rigveda. While this was the grand concept of equality and liberty in this country at the earliest period of civilization but the society came to be divided sometime later on the basis of four varnas.

Some Ramayanic and Mahabharat evidences show important role of subject in the affairs of state. Dasharatha consulting his subjects, the Brahmanas, Balamukyas, puras and janapadas, before coming to a decision about the yuvaraja Rama (Ayo II 19.20). On the death of Dasharatha, while Bharatha was absent, some of the Rajakarthaah proposed the election of any other Ikshvaku prince to the throne. Then vasista suggests Sita on the vacant therone of her exiled husband. The Shantiparva of Mahabharata says “Participation of too many people in the affairs being a great flaw in the republican polity”. The numerous numbers of a sovereign Gana or Sangha interacted with each other as members

of an assembly, voting, lawmaking, quorum, acting as an executive were general functions of Gana or Sangha.

Koutilya's Arthashastra says "the most important duty of a monarch is to protect the people, the monarch has to identify with the people, he has to act on the advice of ministers. A dishonest and corrupt king must be dealt with confiscated all his ill-gotten wealth". Neetisara of Sukracharya says "the king was not to work upon his own opinions, but opinion of the people. Public opinion is more powerful than the king as the role made of many fibers is strong enough to drag a lion.

In ancient polity kings are bound by Dharma. If the king violated the laws of Dharma (Rajadharma), he was also subject to the punishment. Vedic political theory recognized Dharma as the true sovereign. Dharma was corresponded more closely with the modern concept of rule of law. State powers were used by kings in according to morals of society. Forms of governments were not a matter of importance but a statecraft given more importance. All ancient Indian thinkers emphasised the need of a state and thought that, in its absence jungle law will come unto picture. Koutilya and Sukra expressed their opinion that, "when a king is failed in seeking and promoting welfare activities, then he could be punished, removed from the throne, such a king should be killed like a mad dog. Therefore, the king should specially look after people's welfare.

The king could not declare war except with the approval of the 'Rastra Sabha. Sabha, samiti, army and state treasury supported the king when he functions in according to the will of the people. A person could ascend to the throne only with the approval of the people. If a king is indulged in injustice, had false promises, then he could be removed by the people, regarding this SriArabindo puts it "King as the representative of the divine power and the guardian of the Dharma, his power was not personal, infact a limited or constitutional monarch. The king was only the guardian, executors and servant of the Dharma. When he is incompetence and does not execute dharma and satisfy people, this is sufficient to remove him".

After Mahabharat war large empires began to fade away and number of republican states grew such as Kashi, Koshala, Magadha, Kuru, Anga, Avanti, Gandhar, Vaishali, Matsya etc came into being. Jatakas make many references to how these republics functioned. The members met in a place called 'Santagar' 12 people's representative were elected in open assembly. They selected their Gopa, who become king and ruled with the help of a council of ministers. Both Mahaveera and Buddha came from such republics.

In the fourth century B.C the republican federation known as the Kshudrak Malla Sangha had offered strong resistance to Alexander. Contemporary Greek historians have left descriptions of many republican states in India. Some of which were described by them as pure democracies, while others were said to be aristocratic republics. Near Pataliputra, there was a city of Vaishali, capital of Lichchavi, which was a republic governed by an assembly of notables with an elected president who

was called the Nayaka. Pataliputra had an elected municipal council of 30 members with six committees of five members. There was panchayat for dispute solving.

The historical records prove that, Rajadharma formed the fundamental law which regulated the constitution and organization of every kingdom in the country throughout the centuries. Indian concept of Rajadharma had all sort of spirit of present concept of democracy, or of social democracy. Rajadharma required the king to extend all the necessary assistance and encouragement to the people.

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