Research Paper

The idea of Democracy in Social, Economic and Political Institutions of Ancient India: An Overview

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Abstract
"Democracy means a system of administration organized to fulfill the aspirations of people living within a particular geographical boundary within a particular span of time. India is a nation with a rich cultural, social, religious, and political heritage of the highest quality and standard. In the sixth century BCE, we can see the 16 Janapada, and most historians argue that it was the inception of democratic institutions. Before this era, during the Vedic age, the tribes were the order of the day; the Sabha, Samiti, and Vidhata were the people's representative organizations and had an important say in the day-to-day administration of the state. Besides this, another type of organization based on economic and social bonding was the Sreni system, in which the professional groups organized themselves into institutions to protect their interests in the state system and trade and commerce. Besides this, religious organizations of Buddhism and Jainism like Buddha Sanghas, or Samghas, and Jain Sanghas are started on the principles of discussion, and decisions are taken after giving due importance to the different opinions. Most historians and political scientists say that these organizations were the best democratic institutions in ancient India. In this article, an effort is made to understand the democratic tendencies as noticed in these institutions, available in inscriptional and literary records. The present democratic institutions have many similarities to the institutions of ancient India."
Key Words: *Democracy, Janapada, Sabha, Samiti, Vidhata, Sreni, Institutions*

I.   Introduction

The term "democracy" derives from its Greek origins in demos (the people) and kratos (rule) and refers to a form of government based on rule by the people with popular sovereignty as its defining feature. (Smith, 2008) Man, from the early phase of civilization until today, continues to evolve in every aspect of society. In the same way, with regards to administration, holding sovereignty, and controlling the resources of the state, many policies were adopted, resulting in the development of a of a government system in the form of monarchy, republic, and some type of people-oriented government called democracy. The meaning of democracy comes from the workings of its institutions, like the legislature, executive, and judiciary. Then question comes was really democracy was there in past world. The answer is yes, but not what type of democracy or its institutions we are seeing today were not there in the past. The first democracy known to man was first developed by the Greek people in the early phase of the 5th BCE in the form of direct democracy, and the land where it was in practice was called a city state or direct democracy. Although it is tempting to assume that democracy was created in one particular place and time—most often identified as Greece—about the year 500 BCE, evidence suggests that democratic government, in a broad sense, existed in several areas of the world well before the turn of the 5th century. With the advent of the Aryan system in India, the idea of two democratic institutions like Sabha and Samiti was noticed, which shows that before the idea of democracy reached Greece, it was very much there in India. But we cannot say that the system of democracy that existed in Greece existed in India as well. May be with some differences, the democratic institutions were there in India, in which the most importance was given to the opinion of the common masses. How much participation there was among women, downtrodden communities, and non-Aryan communities is a questionable issue even to this day. We can find the participation of the common masses in taking major decisions in institutions like Gana, Sangha, Sabha, Samiti, Sreni, and Vidhata, as per the epigraphical and literary references. In organizing and looking after the day-to-day administration of the above-mentioned institutions, the heads of these institutions have followed some code of conduct, which compelled us to believe that a crude constitution concept was also adopted. In business, the most care and security for the interests of consumers were also there. It is an effort to

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find out the democratic principles of ancient Indian democratic institutions in dealing with their daily business and activities.

1.1. Objectives
1). To find out the democratic practices of ancient Indian democratic institutions.
2). T understand the applicability and relevance of this institutions to Indian context.
3). To evaluate the role of common man in this democratic institution.
1.2 Hypothesis: The past democratic institutions of ancient India have had a deep influence on the present-day democratic institutions of modern India.

II.   Conception of Democracy

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, defined democracy as that "form of government in which the supreme power of the state is vested in the hands of the community as a whole". Another Greek philosopher from Amphipolis, Macedonia was Cleon had defined democracy 2400 years ago as, "That shall be democratic, which shall be of the people, by the people and for the people." In modern period this definition was revived by Abraham Lincoln as "it is a government of the people, by the people and for the people".

Joseph Mazzini writes, "Democracy is the government of the best and wisest, for the progress of all and through all." John Robert Seeley has given a precise definition as, "democracy is a government in which everybody has a share". (Agarwal, 2014)

III.   The pillars of democracy

1. Sovereignty of the people.2. Government based upon consent of the governed.3. Majority rule.4. Minority rights.5. Guarantee of fundamental human rights.6. Free and fair elections.7. Equality before law.8. Procedure established by law.9. Constitutional limits on government.10.Social, economic, and political pluralism.11. Values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation, andCompromise. (Program, 2014)

Gandhiji's opinion about Democracy is better understand from his Article of in Young India on July 2, 1931, "To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life. Political power means capacity to regulate national life through national representatives. If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a State everyone is his own master. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbour. In the ideal State, therefore, there is no political power because there is no State. But the ideal is never fully realized in life. Hence the classical statement of Thoreau that the government is best which governs the least –is worthy of consideration." (Gandhi, Gandhis opinion of Democracy, 1931)

In another dated December 1, 1927 Young India, "Democracy is an impossible thing until the power is shared by all.Even a pariah, a labourer, who makes it possible for you to earn your living, will have his share in self-government -Swarajya or democracy."(Gandhi, 1927)

In one interview in Voice of America Dr. BR Ambedkar opines that: "Democracy could not be equated with either republic or parliamentary form of government. The roots of democracy lay not in the form of government, parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is a model of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in social relationship, in terms of the associated life between the people who form the society."

Brahmanical literature gives kingship a central place in political life, and seldom hints that anything else is possible. For moral philosophers and legislators such as Manu (reputed author of the Manu Smrti between 200 B.C. A.D. 200), the king was a key figure in a social order based on caste (varna). Caste divided society into functional classes: the Brahmans had magical powers and priestly duties, the ksatriyas were the rulers and warriors, the vaisyas cultivators, and the sudras the lowest part of society, subservient to the other three. Moral law or dharma depended on the observance of these divisions, and the king was the guarantor of dharma , and in particular the privileges of the Brahmans. (Altekar, 1958)

Another tradition is best exemplified by the Arthasastra of Kautilya (c. 300 B.C.), which alloted the king a more independent role but likewise emphasized his responsibility for peace, justice and stability.(Kautilya's Arthasastra, trans. by R. Shamasastry, 4th ed. (Mysore, 1951; first ed. 1915).

Gana and sangha, the most important of these terms, originally meant "multitude." By the sixth century B.C., these words meant both a self governing multitude, in which decisions were made by the members working in common, and the style of government characteristic of such groups. In the case of the strongest of such groups,which acted as sovereign governments, the words are best translated as "republic." (Altekar A. S., 1978)

The decision of members played main role in day to day administration of gana or state, which was the main features democracy existed in ancient India.

Beside this, regarding Gana and Sangh, Kautilya describe like this, first were political entities where military tradition alone defined those worthy of power, while the second would seem to be communities where wealth derived from peaceful economic activity gave some access to the political process. This interpretation is supported by the fact that sreni or guilds based on an economic interest were often both part of the armed force of a state and recognized as having jurisdiction over their own members.(Majumdar, 1962)

Furthermore, power in some republics was vested in a large number of individuals. In a well known Jataka tale we are told that in the Licchavi capital of Vesali, there were 7707 kings (rajas), 7707 viceroys, 7707 generals, and 7707 treasurers.(Cowell, 1895) This huge numbers of Kings means, the representative of tribes or may be the prominent persons in the state. One thing is clear, that the decisions of all matters are taken by the group of this responsible representative of common masses.

These figures, since they come from about half a millenium after the period they describe, have little evidentiary value, despite the ingenious efforts of scholars to find a core of hard fact. The tale does not give us the number of Licchavi ruling families (rajakulas), the size of the Licchavi assembly, or any real clues as to the population of Vesali.(Cowell, 1895) If this is true, the Licchavi state is the perfect example of Democracy in ancient India.

This was not quite the end of republicanism, because "government by discussion" continued within many ganas and sanghas ; but the idea of hierarchy and inequality, of caste, was increasingly dominant. The degree of corporate autonomy in later Indian society, which is considerable and in itself a very important fact, is in this sense a different topic that the one we have been following. A corporation that accepts itself as a subcaste in a great divine hierarchy is different from the more pugnacious ganas and sanghas of the Pali Canon, Kautilya or even the Jataka stories. All this references in ancient sources of past make us feel that, the Gana, Sangha were the prominent democratic institutions.

IV. Sabha and Samiti

Sabha was the assembly of some selected persons with educational, economic and political background. Generally, their number is not less than 5. These members may be the elected members of village, province or state. All the decisions were taken under their leadership in consultation with samiti members. It act like a present parliamentary system or the punchayati system of 1994. Where as the samiti was the congregation of all able bodied members of village, province and state.

The system of conducting public administration by means of an assembly of the people prevailed in India in the early Vedic times. Throughout the Rig Veda, from the earliest mandala to the latest, we find frequent references to words meaning assembly or council. All the political units of the early Vedic age ascended from kula, grama, vis, and jana to rashtra functions through the popular assemblies and all-important decisions regarding the administration were also taken by them.

The Sabha and Samiti assemblies, in particular, were a crucial part of the government and are mentioned in several passages of Rig Veda, showing the considerable power they held. They must have served as necessary checks and balances on the king's authority. Atharva Veda of the later Vedic period exhibits a unique hymn that testifies that the king considered the advice of the Sabha and Samiti. (Sharma, 2013)

4.1. Sabha: The term sabha frequently appears in the Rig Veda and refers to both "the persons in conclave" and the "hall" where they met and appears to be older than the Samiti. It was a gathering of the elect, i.e., Brahmanas and the wealthy patrons implying that admission was not open for all. Women were allowed to participate in the sabha in the early Vedic period as it was an organization of aristocrats and not so much political. Nevertheless, this assembly also addressed and resolved political and administrative matters and general public issues. Most importantly, free discussions used to be held in the sabha, and a resolution of the sabha was considered binding on all and inviolable. The importance of sabha lies in the fact that rajan considered the advice of this assembly very seriously. Some terms refer to some of the officers of the sabha namely, sabhapati and sabhapala (guardian of sabha), sabhasad (members of Sabha), and sabhacara (judges of the sabha). These also indicate that sabha was not just a meeting place but an important institution responsible for governance, especially in the later period. (Nath, 1921)

4.2. Samiti: The most significant institution of the Rig Vedic period was the Samiti also known as Samgati and Samgram. It was the national assembly of the whole people or visah; for we find that 'the whole people' or samiti in the alternative, including the entire jana (people), electing and re-electing the king (Rajan). Most probably, the samiti dealt with policy decisions and political matters and was considered necessary in advising the king and appeared to be the sovereign body from the constitutional point of view. The head of the samiti was known as Ishan. The Atharvaveda and the Rigveda have prayers for common samiti, which is related to the state's standard policy, which can be elaborated further as 'a common aim and a common mind'. The king used to attend samiti regularly because it was thought necessary that he should do so. One of the hymns of Rigveda

mentions that a true king goes to the Samiti and takes their suggestion. The implication is that the king was required to attend the samiti and would be declared "untrue" if he did not. (Jayaswal, 1943)

4.3. Vidatha: 'Vidatha' meaning order, is another important assembly of the Rig Vedic period and seems to be the earliest institution of the age. The vidatha has been interpreted as a tribal gathering with various purposes and decides on important matters related to religion and warfare. It appears to relate to a local congregation of people gathering to perform socio-religious rituals and ceremonies for the well-being of the people. Vidatha was an assembly for the general public, and women, too, were admissible into it. It appears that its importance decreased in the later period. (Gupta, 2004)

"Assemble, speak together: let your minds be all of one accord, as ancient gods unanimous sit down to their appointed share. The place is common, common the assembly, common the mind, so be your thoughts united. A common purpose do I lay before you, and worship with your general oblation. One and the same be your resolve, and be your minds of one accord. United be the thoughts of all that all may happily agree. (T.H Ralph, 1897)

V.   Sreni system in ancient India

The shreni was an association of traders, merchants, and artisans. Generally, a separate shreni existed for a particular group of persons engaged in the same vocation or activity. (Sarkar, 1966)

Romila Thapar (2000:73) informs us that "The ancient sources frequently refer to the system of guilds which began in the early Buddhist period and continued through the Mauryan period. …. Topography aided their development, in as much as particular areas of a city were generally inhabited by all tradesmen of a certain craft. Tradesmen's villages were also known, where one particular craft was centred, largely due to the easy availability of raw material. The three chief requisites necessary for the rise of a guild system were in existence. Firstly, the localization of occupation was possible, secondly the hereditary character of professions was recognized, and lastly the idea of a guild leader or jetthaka was a widely accepted one. The extension of trade in the Mauryan period must have helped considerably in developing and stabilizing the guilds, which at first were an intermediate step between a tribe and a caste. In later years they were dominated by strict rules, which resulted in some of them gradually becoming castes. Another early incentive to forming guilds must have been competition. Economically it was better to work in a body than to work individually, as a corporation would provide added social status, and when necessary, assistance could be sought from other members. By gradual stages guilds developed into the most important industrial bodies in their areas. (Thapar, 1996)

Thapar explains that the distribution of work was not only organized in terms of the professions living in the town but also in terms of the physical occupation by different professions of different parts of the town. Each sreni had its own professional code, working arrangements, duties and obligations and even religious observances. Matters relating to wider areas of dispute were sometimes settled by srenis among themselves. Social mobility among such groups, where an entire group would seek to change its ritual status on the basis of an improvement of actual status, would be more frequent, since the economic opportunities for improving actual status would be more easily available, particularly in periods of expanding trade. It is not coincidental that the greatest activity of heterodox sects and of religious movements associated with social protest was in periods of expanding trade. (Thapar, 1996)

5.1. Guild Structure

Thaplyal explains that the Guilds had three components: (a) the General Assembly, (b) the Guild Chairman or the Head, and (c) the Executive Officers, each with its well-defined sphere of jurisdiction. (Thaplyal, 2001)

5.1.1 The General Assembly

All the members of the Guild constituted the General Assembly. Jataka stories give round figures of 100, 500,1000 as members of different guilds. There is a reference to 1000 carpenters of Varanasi under two heads. This could be because the number was considered large enough to make the guild unwieldy, though it may be pointed out that a few references to 1000 members of a guild, without division, do occur. The Nasik Inscription of the time of Nahapana refers to two weavers' guilds at Govardhana (Nasik). Mention of bickering within large Guilds is not infrequent and it is possible that a place had more than one Guild of the same trade. (Thaplyal, 2001)

5.1.2. The Guild Head

The head of a guild is often referred to as the jetthaka or pamukkha in early Buddhist literature. Often, he is referred to after the occupation followed by the guild of which he was the head, e.g.,'head of garland makers' (malakarajetthaka), 'head of carpenters' guild' (vaddhakijetthaka), etc. Apparently, the Guild Head

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exercised considerable power over the members of his Guild. Setthis were merchant-cum-bankers and often headed merchant guilds. The guild head could punish a guilty member even to the extent of excommunication. Ancient texts do not seem to specify whether the office of the head of a guild was elective or hereditary though there are positive references to either. It appears that normally headship of a guild went to the eldest son. Succession is mentioned only after the death of the head and not in his lifetime, which would suggest that the head remained in office life-long. The evidence of two Damodarpur Copper-plate inscriptions of the 5th century AD shows that one Bhupala held the office of nagarasreshthi for well-nigh half a century, supports this.(Thaplyal, 2001)

5.1.3. Executive Officers

To assist the guild head and to look after the day-to-day business of the guild, Executive Officers came to be appointed. The earliest reference to Executive Officers is met with in the Yajnavalkyasmriti. Their number varied according to need and circumstances. Yajnavalkya says that they should be pure, free from avarice and knower of the Vedas. It is not specially stated whether the Executive Officers were elected by the Assembly or were nominated by the guild head.(Thaplyal, 2001)

5.2. Functions of the Guilds

Besides serving the purpose of keeping the members of a trade together like a close community, the Guilds undertook many useful roles such as administrative, economic, charitable and banking functions. Thaplyal reports that the powerful Guilds performed judicial functions as well. The guilds had a good deal of administrative control over their members. Looking after the interests of their members making things convenient for them was their prime concern. The trained workers of the guilds provided a congenial atmosphere for work. They procured raw materials for manufacturing, controlled quality of manufactured goods and their price, and located markets for their sale. Although the Arthasastra does not contain any reference to guilds loaning money to the general public, yet there are references suggesting that the king's spies borrowed from guilds on the pretext of procuring various types of merchandize. This shows that guilds loaned money to artisans and merchants as well. Guilds established their efficiency and integrity, and epigraphic evidence shows that not only the general public, even the royalty deposited money with them. However, the guilds had limited scope in banking in comparison to modern banks. Thaplyal refers to a few epigraphs here. A Mathura Inscription (2nd century AD) refers to the two permanent endowments of 550 silver coins each with two guilds to feed Brahmins and the poor from out of the interest money. Of the two Nasik Inscriptions (2nd century AD) one records the endowment of 2000 karshapanas at the rate of one percent (per month) with a weavers' guild for providing cloth to bhikshus and 1000 karshapanas at the rate of 0.75 percent (per month) with another weavers' guild for serving light meals to them. Apart from these more epigraphs and inscriptions are mentioned as evidence in this regard. In addition to this the guilds engaged in works of Charity as well. Guilds worked to alleviate distress and undertook works of piety and charity as a matter of duty. They were expected to use part of their profits for preservation and maintenance of assembly halls, watersheds, shrines, tanks and gardens, as also for helping widows, the poor and destitute.(Thaplyal, 2001)

Besides these functions, the Guilds could try their members for offence in accordance with their own customs and usages, which came to acquire almost the status of law. A guild member had to abide by both guild and state laws. The Vasishtha Dharmasutra holds the evidence of guilds as valid in settling boundary disputes. However the jurisdiction of guild courts was confined to civil cases alone. All guilds acted as courts for their members but either only important ones, or representatives of various guilds authorized by the state, would have acted as courts for general public. Guilds, being organizations of people of different castes following the same profession, would also have had some Brahmin members, some of whom would have been Executive Officers and probably they, with the help of members or Executive Officers of other varnas would have formed the courts of justice. (Thaplyal, 2001)

Considering the distinction between the caste and the guild Thaplyal holds that though similar in some respects, they were basically different. Guilds were economic institutions; castes were social groups. Whereas caste is necessarily hereditary, the guild membership is not so. One could be a member of only one caste, but one could be a member of more than one guild. However, in areas populated by people of the same caste membership of guild and caste coincided and the head of the guild presided over the meetings of both guild and caste. (Thaplyal, 2001)

Lastly, Thaplyal looks into the relationship between the guild and the state informing us that the Guilds enjoyed considerable autonomy, which came not as a favour from the state but by their inherent right. The guilds safeguarded the interests of traders and craftsmen against oppression by the king, as well as legal discrimination they were normally subjected to. Manu enjoins upon a king, to acquire knowledge of laws of the srenis and other institutions while dealing with them. Yajnavalkya lays down that such rules of corporations as are not against sacred laws should be observed. Even Kautilya, a champion of state control over all spheres of activity, lays down rules for the protection of artisans. Since the state earned a sizable income from taxation

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through guilds, it naturally provided facilities to them by maintaining roads for transport of merchandise and also granted subsidies and loans to them. Some prosperous merchants, as members of the guilds, or otherwise, must have extended financial support to kings in times of emergency. Kings honoured guild heads by offering gifts. Guild heads were present at important state ceremonies. The heads of guilds accompanied Suddhodana in welcoming the Buddha, and also Bimbisara in paying a visit to the Buddha. Tradition believes that they, along with others, waited for the coronation ceremony of Bharata, and also accompanied Bharata to visit Rama at Chitrakuta. The naigamas participated in Rama's coronation ceremony. (Thaplyal, 2001)

There is no evidence of a guild or a combination of guilds attempting to capture political power. The guilds of the period were local in character, with no central organization. Interests of different guilds were of different kinds, sometimes even conflicting and so they could hardly form a joint front against the state. However, in case of contests for succession to the royal throne, they might have helped the claimants of their choice in acquiring it. However, Kautilya advises the king to see that heads of different guilds do not unite against him, and win the support of the guilds by means of reconciliation and gifts, and to weaken the ones as are inimical to him. He also advises the king to grant land, which is under attack from enemy to the guild of warriors. Guild quarrels, both internal and external, provided the king with appropriate opportunities to interfere in guild affairs. Yajnavalkya enjoins that a king should settle quarrels among guilds according to their usages and make them follow the established path. (Thaplyal, 2001)

So, we find that Thaplyal in this article, well substantiated by literary evidence, has tried to show that the social institutions that we generally attribute to the ingenuity of the west were already present in the socio-economic structures of ancient Indian society.(Thaplyal, 2001)

We had made such unique social innovations which served a variety of useful functions: specialisation of crafts, quality control of products, defence against state's oppression, composing differences among different sections of society, providing justice to the needy, charity to the poor etc. Guilds were perhaps the earliest democratic institutions of the world. (Thaplyal, 2001)

VI.   Conclusion:

Though monarchy was the usual form of government in ancient India, tribal states also existed, which were governed by oligarchies. The term "republic" is often used for these bodies, and though it has been criticized by some authorities, it is quite legitimate if it is remembered that the ganas, or tribes, were not governed like the Republic of India by an assembly elected by universal suffrage. The Roman Republic was not a democracy, but it was a republic nonetheless, and the evidence shows that in some of these ancient Indian republican communities, a large number of people had some say in the government. (Basham, 2007) If we go through the Buddhist Sangh activities, two institutions, Buddha Vihara, the place where the Buddhist Bikshu and Bikshuni assembled, used to discuss the different strategies to spread the teachings of Buddha. Generally, this discussion was based on a written code of conduct. It can be noticed the existence of the first quasi-constitution concept in India. Though we are not able to notice present-day democratic institutions in ancient India, some familiar characters can be noticed in their day-to-day activities. The Kautilya says that the king is supreme in state, but he has to rule based on the wishes of his subjects. He further says that the welfare of his subject is the welfare of the king. This idea of welfare state, which means welfare of a subject or resident of a nation, can be readily seen in the stone inscriptions of Ashoka the Great. In the historical sources related to India up to 300. CE, we get references to people-oriented institutions like Sreni, Buddha Sangha, Gana. Sabha, Samiti, Niagamma, and Vidhata. The Sreni reference is available in both literary records and archaeological records available in ancient India and early medieval India. If we find out the main principles of Sreni, or trading guilds, all decisions were taken in consultation with their members on the basis of majority opinion. The very structure and functions of Sreni tell us that the management of this is made possible by the involvement of many people. So, some sort of democratic principle exists in this socialist and democratic system. In the same way, the idea of Gana came into practice in the sixth century BCE. In this system, a group of kings shows the number of responsible citizens. Buddha Sangha, another democratic institution, was the most perfect democratic institution of this era. Only after general discussion were decisions adopted. The head of the sangha is not the real head, but the members also play the main role. Another institution, which we say is more confidential, is Sabha and Samiti. This institution is the best and very nearest to the present-day democratic institution. It was purely a people's representative, right from the early historic period to the present. So in total, we can say that we can notice unique democratic institutions, some of which are different from European institutions.

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