

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS OF THE RIG VEDIC AGE

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Abstract:

The idea of democracy has been widely studied and practiced throughout the world. However, there is a belief that the ancient Indian civilization did not have a democratic political system of governance and only practiced a monarchical form of government. This belief has been contested by many scholars who have examined ancient Indian literature and have found evidence of democratic institutions that existed in the Vedic age. The Rigveda and Atharvaveda mention representative institutions in the Vedic political system known as ‘Sabha’ and ‘Samiti’. These institutions play significant roles in the governance and decision-making processes of that era. In addition, research on this subject reveals some interesting facts which have completely refuted such widely shared belief. In this framework, the objective of this study is to examine: a) what were the democratic institutions that existed in ancient India, particularly in the Rig Vedic age? b) How did these democratic institution’s function, and what was their role in the governance of ancient India? Therefore, this study is based on the hypothesis: a) the ancient Indian civilization had well-developed democratic institutions that existed in the Vedic age, such as the Sabha and Samiti, which played a crucial role in the governance of ancient India. b) These democratic institutions functioned as representative bodies that enabled citizens to participate in the decision-making process and hold their rulers accountable. c) The democratic institutions that existed in ancient India had a significant impact on the social, political, and cultural life of the society, and contributed to the development of a vibrant and diverse civilization

Keywords: Atharvaveda, Democracy, Gana, Rig Vedas, Sabha, Samiti, Vidatha.

INTRODUCTION

On September 25, 2021 while, addressing the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said an important historical point: India is not just the world’s largest democracy, but also the “mother of democracy”. Thereby, this assertion about the existence of democratic traditions in ancient India has been a subject of heated debate among scholars and historians. Likewise, it is accurate to discourse the historical narrative based on a written record. However, it is important to note that historical narratives are often based on written records and archaeological evidence, which can be subject to different interpretations and biases. Therefore, a critical analysis of the available evidence is essential to establish an accurate historical narrative. The study of written records such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Arthashastra, along with archaeological evidence, can provide valuable insights into the nature and scope of democratic institutions that existed in ancient India. These vast sources of literature, help us to understand the history of democratic traditions in India.

INSIGHTS FROM THE VEDAS

In Atharvaveda, Sabha and Samiti are referred to as the two daughters of Prajapati, the Vedic God. The term Sabha is mentioned about 8 times in Rig Veda and 17 times in Atharvaveda. Whereas, the Samiti occurred 9 times in Rig Veda and 13 times in Atharvaveda. The Rajan has assisted in the discharge of his duties by these councils. Likewise, the Rig Veda mentioned Gana 46 times and 9 times in Atharvaveda.

The Vidatha is referred to 122 times in the Rig Veda and 22 times in the Atharva Veda. Altogether, the members of the two councils exercised control over the king. They advised and guided the king on all matters. But, Sabha and Samiti were the two democratic powerful institutions which executed a major role in administrative matters.

EXAMINING THE FOUR COUNCILS

The ancient Indian civilization has a rich history and culture, with evidence of a highly developed system of governance that dates back to the Rig Vedic period. One of the most interesting aspects of the ancient Indian political system is the presence of four councils – Sabha (council), Samiti (committee), Vidhata (assembly), and Gana (group)- which played an important role in the governance of the ancient Indian society.

SABHA

The *Sabha* also referred to a "body of men shining together", suggesting that people of great distinction. It was depicted as an assembly of prominent members, people with higher powers and positions. Sabha was a permanent body of elected people. The Sabha was the most important of the four councils and was essentially a gathering of the people. It was a place where people could come together to discuss matters of importance, make decisions, and resolve disputes. Some of its key functions included:

- **Other Assemblies**

The Sabha was often led by a chief or 'Sabhapati', who was responsible for maintaining order and ensuring that the meetings were conducted in a fair and equitable manner. The Vedas mention the 'Sabhasthanu', which was the pillar of the assembly hall, indicating that the Sabha existed as a physical structure or a meeting hall. The Sabha was not the only assembly that existed in ancient India. There were additional assemblies for conducting various activities, such as the Sabhayogya (worthy people), Sabhasad (member of the assembly), Sabhasaha (eminent in the assembly), Sabhavati (women member), Sabhapala (guardian of the assembly), and Sabhavin (keeper of the assembly). Each of these assemblies had its specific function, and their members were selected based on their respective qualifications.

- **Governance**

During the Rig Vedic Age, the governance and administrative functions revolved around a tribal system, where the Rajanyas held significant importance. In the context of trade and other matters, the Sabha held a crucial role in policymaking, including regulating prices and resolving disputes between traders. Additionally, it was responsible for enacting laws and policies that governed the tribe. Similarly, matters related to war and peace were also discussed and decided upon by these democratic bodies. For instance, the decision to wage war against a neighboring tribe would be made after thorough discussions and deliberations among the members. He was assisted by several functionaries, including the purohita (chaplain), the senani (army chief), dutas (envoys), and spash (spies). They advised the king on matters related to governance and administration and ensured that the welfare of the tribe was maintained. The members use to meet and discuss social and political issues which indicate that they executed administrative functions. Moreover, the 'political culture' of the time was characterised by resolving various matters of public interest through the participation of local self-units. Political matters were also debated freely in the democratic bodies. In these meetings, a collective decision was taken after the discussion with the members including the king, ministers, chief officials, scholars, elders or nobles and other important people.

- **Judicial Authority**

There are references in the Rig Veda showing that the Sabha use to perform judicial authority as a form of legal institution. The most frequently mentioned crimes include theft, robbery and cattle theft etc. Thereof, the criminal is required to be produced before the Sabha. Then the king along with other members of the Sabha exercised criminal and civil jurisdiction against the offender. The judicial system in the Rig Vedic Age was primarily based on the concept of Dharma, which encompassed the moral and ethical

values that governed the behavior of individuals in society. Disputes were settled through a system of arbitration, where a neutral party would mediate and try to find a mutually agreeable solution. There were also designated judges, known as "Prajapatis," who was responsible for dispensing justice in criminal cases. Punishments for crimes ranged from fines to imprisonment or even capital punishment in severe cases. The Rig Vedic society also had a system of punishment for social offences known as "Prayaschitta." These offenses included violating religious or moral codes, and the punishment varied according to the severity of the offense. There was also the continuation of the judicial system of the Sabha in the later Vedic period. Even today, the legacy of these assemblies can be seen in the Upper House of Rajya Sabha (Council of States) in the Indian Parliament.

• **Women's Participation**

The Vedic age witnessed the remarkable significance and contributions of women, leaving a lasting impact on Indian society. Women held an essential role during this period and were highly esteemed in society. The Rig Veda mentions the presence of women members, referred to as 'Sabhavati,' in the Sabha, akin to modern-day women MPs or MLAs. In various fields, women were seen as complementary to their male counterparts. They actively participated in assemblies and contributed to the deliberations of the Sabha. The Rigveda revered numerous female sages as a repository of profound knowledge. Notably, several significant female philosophers, such as Brahmavadini Gargi Vachaknavi, Ghosha, Lopamudra, and Sulabha Maitreyi, were renowned for their wisdom and spiritual achievements. Ancient Indian texts record that these women scholars were adept in engaging in debates and could contest male philosophers with equal prowess. Therefore, the position of women during the Vedic age was highly respected and regarded. Even today, their bequest can be seen in the Indian Parliament where women have equal rights and representation in governance. This shows that the ancient concept of women's participation and empowerment in governance has continued to shape and influence modern Indian democracy. The recognition of women's rights and inclusion in governance is an essential aspect of creating a fair and just society.

Debating with the Sage: Gargi Vachaknavi's Encounter with Yajnavalkya

In ancient Indian texts, Brahmavadini Gargi Vachaknavi emerges as a prominent philosopher and one of the most esteemed female scholars during the Vedic Age. Renowned for her exceptional intellect and proficiency in engaging in philosophical debates with male scholars, she left a lasting impression on her contemporaries.

One notable event in her life was her participation in the philosophical conference summoned by King Janaka of Mithila. During this gathering, she fearlessly challenged the renowned sage Yajnavalkya to a public debate. The central theme of their discussion revolved around the nature of the self, and Gargi astounded the audience by posing a series of thought-provoking questions that tested Yajnavalkya's understanding of the subject matter. As recounted in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Gargi's intellectual prowess shone through, and she demonstrated her ability to hold her own against Yajnavalkya, even managing to stump him with some of her insightful inquiries.

This account serves as a notable illustration of the significant contributions made by women in intellectual and philosophical circles during the Vedic Age. It emphasizes the recognition of women's intelligence and their active participation in debates and discussions, where they were regarded as equals to their male counterparts.

SAMITI

Alike, another important assembly is known as **Samiti** where all the members of the clan and tribe gathered. The head of Samiti was known as 'Pati'. It is mostly related to political activities. The Samiti was a smaller committee that was responsible for making important decisions on behalf of the community. The members of the Samiti were often chosen by the Sabha, and were expected to be knowledgeable and

experienced in matters of governance. The Samiti was responsible for implementing the decisions made by the Sabha. Additionally, it had the crucial role of ensuring the well-protection and care of the community. Besides, it has been suggested by several references that the Samiti was much higher than Sabha as it had the power to elect and re-elect the Rajan. The autonomy of the Rajan was restricted by the tribal councils. Accordingly, it shows that if the king is not suitable for the subject, then he could be dismissed by the Samiti. The Rajan does not enjoy absolute authority over the state. Therefore, the power and position of the king were not permanent. The Samiti was much like the lower house of our *Lok Sabha* (House of People) with members who were representatives of the people.

Hence, it indicates that both the Sabha and the Samiti held significant roles in the governance of the tribe. They served as checks and balances, ensuring that the Rajan did not abuse his power and acted in the best interests of the community. To accede to the throne, the Rajan had to seek the approval of both bodies, the Sabha and the Samiti. This requirement ensured that he gained the support of the people and remained accountable to them throughout his rule. Arthur Llewellyn Basham, a noted historian and Indologist, suggested that the Sabha and the Samiti were two different bodies with different functions in the Vedic political system.

VIDHATA

The term "Vidatha" is mentioned in various Vedic texts with specific frequencies: it appears 10 times in the Vajasaneyi Samhita, 21 times in the Brahmanas, and once in the Taittiriya Aranyaka. Its etymology derives from "vid," denoting knowledge. The Vidhata, characterized as a 'kin-based community' council, held the responsibility of overseeing the communal well-being. Its members were typically selected based on familial connections within the community, entrusted with ensuring the community's needs were addressed.

The Rig Veda contains a passage detailing that participants gathered in the Vidatha assembly were required to be present during the daily distribution of offerings by Savitr. This context portrays Agni as the gracious distributor of resources in the Vidatha assembly.

Vidatha holds a potential military dimension, potentially serving as a military institution within the Vedic milieu. Alongside this, it maintains a significant religious role. Sayana's perspective suggests that Vidatha took on the form of a Yajna, a ritual of sacrifice. This dual identity of Vidatha encompasses both its military and religious roles within the Vedic societal structure.

GANA

The term Gana denotes Jana, which translates to "count." The Gana was a council comprised of the community members themselves, entrusted with the important task of making collective decisions. Ganhas are further divided into "Kulas" or families. This division pattern extends to commercial Ganas, as evidenced by seals discovered at sites like Bhita and Basarah. In Vedic texts, the Maruts are referred to as Ganas. Marut, the offspring of Rudra, is numbered either 49 or 63 and is grouped into seven segments, each containing nine members. The leader of a Gana, occasionally referred to as "Ganasya raja," is commonly known as Ganapati. The Aitareya Brahmana invokes the king as "Gananapati." The role of the Ganapati encompassed maintaining order and overseeing impartial and just proceedings during the gatherings. It served as a true embodiment of democratic principles, as choices were reached through a process of consensus-building.

In short, the four councils of ancient India – Sabha, Samiti, Vidhata, and Gana – played an important role in the governance of the society. The presence of these councils in the ancient Indian political system is evidence of a highly developed system of governance that was characterized by a combination of monarchy and republics. The political bodies were structured by elements typically associated with a tribal unit, such as a sense of community, shared values, and a belief in the importance of consensus-based decision-making. Therefore, all these councils of ancient India not only reflect the democratic traditions of the time but also continue to influence the modern Indian political system.

CONCLUSION

The Vedic era in India marked the emergence of diverse political and social frameworks, setting the stage for the development of democratic principles. This period laid the foundation for India's extensive history of democratic institutions, reflecting the origins of these principles. Built upon democratic ideals, these historical entities were characterized by the functioning of representative assemblies and deliberative bodies. These features underscored the significance of democratic principles in their operations. At its core, the democratic ethos has consistently been a vital aspect of ancient India, as evidenced by the prevalence of various democratic systems practiced throughout the country over the centuries. This enduring commitment to democratic principles underscores India's historical legacy of valuing inclusive governance and participatory decision-making. Additionally, following the Vedic age, these institutions endured, albeit undergoing evolution in their essence and character as time progressed. Thus, India can rightly be acknowledged as a pioneer of the contemporary notion of parliamentary governance, rooted in these early democratic establishments.

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