

# Republics in Question: Rethinking the Governance of Ganas and Sangas

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## Abstract

Ancient Indian Texts recognized the difference between political structure and the governance of Rajas and Ganas or Sanga. Rajya has been described in this text as a political state with a monarchical government. Rajay's have often been popularised in ancient texts and on number of times preferred over Ganas and Sanga's for several reasons. Ganas and Sanga on the other hand, have been seen as completely opposite to monarchy. After the 1970s, a large number of works were produced in the academic circle on the governance of Rajay Ganas and Sanga. Majorly this work focuses on to setup the narratives that Ganas and Sanga were republican states of ancient India. They supported their argument by mentioning the fact that in Ganas and Sanga's the subjects had the power to choose the ruler. Another significant aspect of Ganas and Sanga was that they were ruled by the assembly, not by the individual monarch. Recent trends in History writing completely change this narrative by revising the available sources. In this trend, Upinder Singh's name is worth mentioning here. According to Dr. Singh, we have missed the very soul of Ganas and Sanga by misjudging them by the ancient form of republican state. The old narration which revolves around this notion that they were a republican state itself has lots of problems. First of all, this narration completely misjudges the process of selection of rulers. According to previous writings, the very own people of the state have the right to choose but they miss the fact it was all ruled by the Kshatriya clan and only Kshatriya had the privilege to choose and qualify for the ruling assembly. This grand old narrative fails to notice this significant aspect of Ganas and Sanga. Apart from this we also need to think in what context this narration had been developed. Is this the counter narration to challenge the colonial mind? In this paper, I would like to discuss some of the trends to understand the political structure of Ganas and Sanga which will strengthen readers' understanding of the topic.

**Keywords:** Ganas and Sanga's, Rajay's, Republican, kshatriya, political structure.

## Introduction

The period from c. 600–300 BCE must be taken into consideration here. From this period onward, the comparison of sources becomes more realistic. The sources used to study the political history of Ganas and Sanghas fall into three broad categories.

The first category is Buddhist literature, which is largely in the Pali language. The first four books of the Sutta Pitaka and the entire Vinaya Pitaka were composed between the 5th and the 3rd centuries BCE. The problem with this category of sources is that their compositions largely took place in modern-day North India. Therefore, this category of sources has geographical limitations and cannot be used to study the overall political structure.

The second category of sources is drawn from the Brahmanical tradition. These sources fall into two categories: Puranas and Dharmasastras. The Puranas provide the chronology of various monarchical kings, the origin of kingship, the history of their families, and dynastic histories. However, using Puranas as a source for this period is problematic because they often contradict each other on many historical and dynastic details and even criticize each other on certain occasions. Thus, they cannot be considered reliable sources. The Dharmasastras, on the other hand, are normative works and cannot be considered authentic representations of the daily practices of the general population. Instead, they reflect the cultural practices of Brahmanical communities at large.

The third category of sources comes from the Jain tradition, which primarily consists of canonical texts. However, this category also has its own set of issues.

Our knowledge about the Janapadas and Mahajanapadas comes from the above-mentioned sources, along with the writings of Greco-Roman authors, who documented Alexander's invasion of the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. These writings mainly discuss the political conditions of these areas during that time.

Buddhist and Jain texts list 16 powerful states, called *Solasa Mahajanapadas*. These texts mention the existence of these Mahajanapadas, but that does not mean smaller political entities did not exist parallelly. Two kinds of states are mentioned in the list of Mahajanapadas: monarchies (*Rajyas*) and non-monarchies, known as *Ganas* and *Sanghas*. The latter two terms are often used interchangeably. If we translate *Janapadas*, it refers to a combination of urban and rural areas with inhabitants.

Here, I aim to highlight an issue long associated with the *Ganas* and *Sanghas*: their political structure and how nationalist writers used this narrative to counter colonial depictions during and after the colonial period.

It has been considered that *Ganas* and *Sanghas* were early examples of 'Republican' states in Ancient India and are often compared with Ancient Greek democracy. However, considering *Ganas* and *Sanghas* as early Republican states is problematic. Instead, they should be viewed as oligarchies. If we examine the political structure and governance of the *Ganas* and *Sanghas*, we realize that these political entities were largely dominated by the Kshatriya clan. This clan was responsible for running the state and had the exclusive power to choose members for the state assembly from within their group. This system was neither Republican nor democratic and, therefore, cannot be considered Republican.

### **Political Formation of *Ganas* and *Sanghas*.**

As a reader of the political history of *Ganas* and *Sanghas*, one must understand their political formation. To comprehend this, I would like to mention the name of Upinder Singh. In her writings on *Ganas* and *Sanghas*, Prof. Singh noted that these entities were formed either by making tribal politics more complex or by converting existing monarchies into *Ganas* and *Sanghas*. For example, the popular Videha was initially a monarchy but later transformed into a *Gana*.

There were two kinds of *Ganas*: first, those formed by including all tribes, and second, those formed as a confederation dominated by one prominent tribe. Due to their emphasis on tribal confederation, they were considered to be more politically aware. However, this notion was misinterpreted by nationalist writers, who erroneously highlighted the republican aspect of the *Ganas* and compared them to Ancient Greek democracy in an attempt to refute Western writers who often portrayed Ancient India as politically despotic.

In reality, power was concentrated in the hands of the Kshatriya clan in the Ganas, rather than with the general population. The authority to choose members of the assembly was vested in this clan, and they even elected members from within their group. In short, this form of government was oligarchical, with the assembly being dominated by the Kshatriya elite.

Another important aspect that needs to be highlighted is the narrative of labeling these entities as republican states, which was largely influenced by non-Brahmanical literature, especially Buddhist and Jain canonical texts. One key reason behind this perspective is how these non-Brahmanical texts viewed such political entities. As mentioned earlier, in the Ganas, power was predominantly concentrated in the hands of the Kshatriyas. This meant that Brahmins no longer held a superior position in the social hierarchy of the Ganas. There are instances where Brahmins were even denied gifts and other privileges they enjoyed under monarchical states. As a result, these non-Brahmanical texts viewed the Ganas as entities free from Brahmanical dominance and, therefore, democratic in nature.

### **Does Ganas and Sangha are really the political state?**

The consideration of Ganas and Sanghas as political states also requires much scholarly discussion. Brahmanical texts completely disapproved of any political structure that lacked a monarchy. According to these texts, political states with non-monarchical authorities needed to be conquered by monarchical states. The reasoning behind this argument is straightforward. These texts emphasized that Ganas lacked effective decision-making power, and the frequent lack of coordination among Sabha members in Ganas often caused more problems for their subjects than it solved.

Since Ganas were governed by a confederation of tribes, they lacked standing armies, making them vulnerable to conquest by their enemies. This vulnerability further affected their relationships with neighboring states. Moreover, Ganas were often criticized for lacking the essential characteristics of a state. The absence of decision-making authority and frequent internal quarrels among members of the Sabha rendered governance ineffective.

Another notable aspect of Ganas and Sanghas was the absence of private property. Walter Ruben's perspective is worth mentioning here. According to Ruben, the concept of private property was entirely absent in Ganas. Instead, clans exercised collective rights over land. He also observed that among the Lichhavis, the most beautiful women were considered collective property of the assembly members and were thus prohibited from marrying. This notion of governance in Ganas was heavily criticized in Brahmanical texts. The collective ownership of land by assembly members often created administrative challenges rather than facilitating governance. The state's resources frequently became a source of rivalry among clan members, and the selection of the most aggressive representatives often exacerbated issues instead of resolving them.

Given these factors, considering Ganas as political states or entities must be reevaluated by scholars. Consequently, labeling them as Republican states remains premature.

### **Conclusion**

In order to construct the history of the period c.600–300 BCE, we must incorporate a variety of sources. While we cannot deny the wealth of information available through the literature of this period, constructing a more comprehensive and accurate picture requires the integration of archaeological sources. For instance, the pottery culture of this period, particularly the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), provides valuable insights into the material culture and societal practices. Additionally, the punch-marked

coins from this period serve as a significant source, marking a new development in the historical record. These coins help us understand the dynastic and chronological history of the era more effectively.

Another important aspect that requires reconsideration is the idea of labeling the Ganas and Sanghas as republics. This narrative, initially proposed by Prof. Jaiswal, was largely motivated by the need to counter the writings of Western thinkers who had long portrayed India as a nation that failed to develop political ideas in ancient times, thereby categorizing it as a despotic country. The notion of calling these entities republics was often driven by emotional attachment and nationalist sentiment rather than a genuine political understanding.

Recent trends in historical writing have emphasized the Revisionist approach, which involves revisiting existing sources to explore alternative perspectives. This approach has significantly challenged and transformed many grand narratives in Indian history. Applying this methodology to the study of Ganas and Sanghas, and critically examining the narrative of labeling them as republics, is one such Revisionist approach adopted by contemporary scholars.

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