

Experiments of Republics in Early India: Political Structures, Governance, and Historical Trajectory

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Abstract

This paper analyses the emergence of the Gana-Sanghas (republics) of ancient India, their institutional structure, and the causes and circumstances of their decline. The study is primarily based on Buddhist literature, the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, Panini's Ashtadhyayi, and Kautilya's Arthashastra; archaeological sources include coins and epigraphic evidence. This study clearly demonstrates that "Gana" and "Sangha" did not represent uniform constitutional structures. In some cases, they were clan-based political communities; in others, confederations of multiple units; and in others, military-based organisations. Their assembly deliberations and collective decisions were remarkable, but power often rested with a limited elite. Therefore, they can be considered oligarchies, within limits, rather than modern universal democracies. From time to time, these republics' independence was disrupted, especially by Magadha's imperial ambitions under various dynasties. Through many ups and downs, these republics contributed to Indian history for over a thousand years, giving rise to a system of governance that was rare in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Gana, Sangha, Natti, Shalaka-Prajnapan, Vartashabdopajeevi, Rajshabdopajeevi.

Introduction

The political history of ancient India is not merely the history of dynasties and empires. In the mid-first millennium BC, in the Gangetic plains and in many regions of the northwest, political communities existed whose power was not concentrated in a single hereditary emperor. Literature uses terms such as "Gana," "Sangha," "Gana-Sangha," and "Sangha-Janapada" to describe them. Examples include the Licchavi, Malla, Shakya, and Koliya in eastern India, and the Yaudheya, Malava, Ambashta, Udumbara, Katha and Kuninda in the northwest. However, these units varied considerably in size, social structure, and political organisation. Therefore, rather than presenting them as a single ideal republic, we should view them as a diverse group of changing polities.

This topic matters because republics, like monarchies, took many forms. This study attempts to understand the distinctive qualities of their governance that the Buddha praised, and the flaws that led to their decline. It also attempts to explain the social boundaries within which the assembly and consultation functioned, and why their autonomy proved vulnerable in the face of an expanding, imperial state.

This research analyses the development and decline of the republics, as well as their governance, based on available literary and material evidence. It examines evidence for their institutions, the relationship between literary ideals and behaviour, and the impact of Magadha's expansion. Here, the term "*Ganarajya*" does not mean a modern sovereign civil republic; scholars have interpreted it in various ways. "*Gana*-

Sangha" is a different term, referring to an organisation resulting from the agreement of several republics. The study covers the period from the late Vedic period to the Gupta Empire.

Sources and Methodology

The study uses both literary and archaeological sources and compares them as needed. The Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Buddhist Digha Nikaya depicts the assembly, traditional rules, and guild unity in the context of the conflict between the Vajjis and Magadha. The Vinaya literature describes the rules for the formal proceedings of the bhikshu Sangha—proposals, consent, dissent, and decisions. However, the bhikshu Sangha was a religious institution; its procedures cannot be taken as a direct determinant of the governance of political ganas. It is merely a comparative indication of collective behaviour developed in a similar political and cultural environment, and can only serve as a reference.

The Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata provides detailed reflection on ganas' unity, leadership, internal conflicts, and external interference.[1] Because historians have acknowledged the possibility of a multi-layered text in this epic, its ethical discussions cannot be taken as evidence of a particular historical period. Commentaries such as Panini's Ashtadhyayi and Kashika shed light on the terminology of the Sanghas and armed communities, although they do not provide specific information on their functioning.[2] Kautilya's Arthashastra, in particular, views the Gana Sanghas critically as state rivals and diplomatic targets, describing their evils and vices and suggesting measures to destroy them.[3]

Inscriptional evidence regarding the Gana Sanghas is insufficient, but their coins have been discovered in sufficient numbers to shed significant light on their presence and territories. Coins bearing the names of communities such as the Yaudheyas indicate political identity and military organisation, but do not reveal the composition of the Sabha or its governance system. In historiography, the Gana Sanghas have sometimes been described as examples of ancient democracy and sometimes as oligarchy. Sociohistorical perspectives place them within the changing context of lineage, warfare, economy, and state-building. [4, 5].

Origin and Expansion

The origin of republics and *Ganasanghas* can be traced back to the primitive form of regional janapadas, a people-based organisation in post-Vedic societies. Republics and monarchies emerged simultaneously from the rural self-governance system created by the heads of Vedic clans. This evidence appears in a more developed form during the Mahajanapadas, when both emerged as urban states in different locations. The epics also mention both systems at the same time. However, the emergence of republics appears more natural and spontaneous. In the pre-civilisation era, humans lived in clans and entered the era of production as cooperative communities. A small state can also be considered an evolved form of this cooperative community.

The ancient Buddhist text Vinayapitaka and the Jain text Bhagavatisutra mention sixteen Mahajanapadas. Although their lists differ, historians consider the Buddhist tradition more relevant, according to which most of the sixteen Mahajanapadas were monarchical. In the north-east, Vajji and Malla were two republics. Vajji was a confederation that included eight republics. The Lichchhavis played a prominent role in the Vajji confederation. The Mallas had two kingdoms: Kushinagar and Pava. The Shakyas lived in the Kapilvastu region, and the Koliyas were a separate political community; all were in some way related to the Buddha. All these republics had marital, economic, religious, and military ties with Magadha, Kosala, and other kingdoms. The Vajji confederation even participated in a long-term war against Ajatashatru. According to Buddhist literature, Ajatashatru defeated the Vajji confederation through Vassakara's machinations. Jain texts hold a highly prejudiced view of republics. Although Mahavira, the

twenty-fourth Tirthankara, himself belonged to a republican family, Jain texts forbid monks from entering such republics. They believed republics empower corrupt individuals, leading to hatred and strife.[6]

The Mahabharata mentions communities like the Yadavas, Andhakas, Vrishnis, Bhojas, Malavas, Yaudheyas, Shivas, and Ambasthas, indicating the existence of political communities. The Shanti Parva records Krishna's account of the internal factionalism and leadership problems of the Andhakas and Vrishnis. Panini and later northwest literature, dating back to the fifth century BCE, refer to the Kshudrakas, Malavas, Yaudheyas, Kathas and other armed communities (*Ayudhjivis*). Certainly, war formation must have been crucial in their unity, as during Alexander's invasion, various republics, such as the Kathas, Malavas, and Kshudrakas, faced Alexander's invasion. The Malavas and Kshudrakas formed a war alliance to decide the outcome of the war, though this alliance was unsuccessful.

No evidence exists of independent republics during the Mauryan period, but the Arthashastra (*Sanghavarita Adhikarana*) describes republics in detail, criticises them, and suggests measures to destroy them. [7]

Kautilya describes two types of republics: the *Vartashastraopjivi* and the *Rajashabdopjivi*. The *Vartashastraopjivi* earned their livelihood from *Varta* (agriculture, trade, and commerce) and *Shashtra* (arms), while the *Rajashabdopjivi* were purely political organisations engaged solely in politics. Altekar believes that both merchants and Kshatriyas participated in governance within the *Vartashastraopjivi* Sangha, while the *Rajashabdopjivi* was an organisation of Kshatriyas who held the title of "*Raja*." [8]

Kautilya mentions the Lichchhavi, Vajji, and Mallak (Malla) tribes north of Magadha, which formed confederations. He mentions the Madrak, Kukur, and Kamboja tribes of the northwestern region. Kautilya states that a conquering king must destroy these federal-minded tribes through *Sama*, *Dana*, *Bhed*, and *Danda*. [9]

During the post-Mauryan period, literary and numismatic evidence shows numerous republics in northwestern India. Prominent republics of this era included the Malavas, Yaudheyas, Kunindas, Arjunayanas, and Udumbaras, whose coins are found throughout the region. These republics' coins were inscribed in *Brahmi* and *Kharoshthi* script. These coins show a unique feature: the inscription reads the name of the Gana, the name of the ruler (or Gana-Pramukha), the name of the deity (i.e., Shiva or Kartikeya), and a moral statement.[10] Yaudheya and Kunindas were aggressive, proud, and warlike republics. They depicted the war god Kartikeya, or Skanda, on their coins and inscribed phrases like "Kuninda Ganasya Jayah and Yaudheyana Jayah." Their valour and martial prowess are evident in the Junagadh inscription of Rudradaman, in which he proudly describes defeating the Yaudheyas. [11] Against the Kushanas, the Yaudheyas formed a confederation with the Arjunayanas and Kunindas.[12] Yaudheyas are mentioned in many other sources, such as the Ashtadhyayi, Brihatsanhita, the Junagarh inscription of Mahakshatrap Rudradaman, the Prayag-Prashasti, etc. Scholars attribute the end of foreign rule from most parts of India to these Ayudhajivi republics, although the Nagas or Bharshivas are also credited with ending foreign rule.

The latest evidence for the Malavas, Arjunayanas, Yaudheyas, Madrakas, Prajunas, Abhiras, Sanakanikas, Kakas, and Kharparikas, located in central and northwestern India, comes from Samudragupta's Prayag-Prasasti inscription. All were located on the western border of Samudragupta's kingdom; none of these states bears the title "Nripa," while the other states bear the word "Nripa." According to the inscription, Samudragupta forced nine republics to accept his suzerainty. All these states followed the policy of paying all taxes, obeying, offering homage, and humbly visiting the court "*Sarvakardanagyakaranapranamagaman*". [13]

Governance System

The governance system of the Ganas, or Gana-sanghas, was probably similar to the Buddhist Sangha. The

assembly of representatives of the clans participating in the Ganasanghas may also have formed the basis for administrative deliberations. Buddhist sources indicate regular assemblies of the Lichchhavis and Vajjis, and they made decisions by majority or unanimous consent. The title "Raja" also appears in the context of the Sanghas, but it was not necessarily the title of a sovereign monarch; it can refer to a member of the nobility or an official. [14]

In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, the Buddha described the essential principles of the Vajjis' power and prosperity. [15] These principles may not have been a written constitution, but rather accepted rules prevalent in practice or traditions. Historians link the assembly's regularity and tradition, as described by the Buddha, to the Sangha's strength.

The Vinaya Pitaka elaborates on procedural steps: notice of a meeting, proposals (natti), silent consent, discussion of dissent, and majority vote gathering. In difficult disputes, it also mentions a smaller group deliberating. This suggests an institutionalised process of consensus and vote counting; however, it is unclear whether political groups applied it in the same way. [16]

The Mahabharata discusses the common problems and weaknesses of confederations. The Shanti Parva discusses the divisions arising from greed, anger, jealousy, and the difficulty of making confidential decisions. In the Krishna-Narada dialogue, leadership must balance rival factions. Krishna himself belonged to the Vrishni confederation, and the disputes that arose during specific decisions are also mentioned in the Mahabharata. The text also includes a comprehensive discussion of which side the confederation should fight on during the great war of the Mahabharata. [17]

Confederations differ from modern democracies because of their limited political membership. Available sources often link decision-making authority in these republics to specific Kshatriya clans or elites. [18] Silence does not prove exclusion, nor does it support a claim to universal citizenship. Therefore, the term "Gana-sangha" fits a community in which power is distributed among numerous elite members and the assembly plays a crucial role.

Rise and Decline

The strength of the Gana-sanghas lay in coordinating their member clans, their military capabilities, and their protection of common interests. This fact was periodically highlighted in various literature, such as by the Buddha in the Digha-Nikaya, by Krishna in the Mahabharata, and by Kautilya in the Arthashastra. Military discipline and war organisation were especially important among the armed or negotiating groups of the northwest. This structure also posed a threat. Competition for prestige and resources among the Ganas could weaken decision-making, and factionalism could allow outside powers to intervene. Two clear examples of this possibility exist: the warning about disunity in the Shanti Parva and the "*Bhed*" policy of the Arthashastra reflect this political sensitivity. [19, 20] However, attributing decline solely to internal strife is insufficient. A state's decline stems from both internal weaknesses and external factors. Just as Kautilya outlined comprehensive measures to destroy the Sangha without any war ethics, this suggests that when monarchical systems reached their peak, hatred toward republics also increased. This is as evident as the hatred and hostility between capitalist countries and communists during the Cold War. In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, Magadha's expansion was supported by arable land, iron resources, the Gangetic waterways, tax collection, and a well-organised army. Buddhist accounts of the conflict with the Vajji Sangha during the reigns of Bimbisara and Ajatashatru reveal intense political competition. The plan to weaken the Vajjis suggests that conquests were based not only on the battlefield but also on diplomacy and internal relations. The rise of larger regional states, and then the Mauryan Empire, limited the independent foreign policies and war-making capabilities of smaller Ganas.

The republics' military organisation and treaty decisions were complex. Military organisations inevitably included members of various clans or Ganas, whose unity depended heavily on their agreements. The

assembly made treaty decisions only by majority vote, which would have been extremely difficult in times of crisis. The Malava-Kshudraka confederacy's decisions during the war with Alexander and the Vajji confederacy's decisions during Ajatashatru's war with the Vajji confederacy were crucial to their defeat. [21,22] When quick decisions were required, the federal system became difficult. In monarchies, the king himself, after consulting the cabinet, made relatively quick decisions.

With the beginning of the Christian era, many foreign tribes began ruling India. Their territories often overlapped with those where republics had also risen and declined. Conflict was inevitable, and the republics proved weak early on. The main reasons for the republics' defeat were their small size, primitive warfare, and their willingness to fight as independent republics rather than forming unions. However, their warlike nature and will to survive gave them another opportunity, leading them to eliminate foreign kingdoms across North India. The legend "*Jayah*" on their coins clearly indicates their victory and establishment of their own kingdoms. [23] Some republics, however, survived as independent, subordinate, or local entities, displaying their names and identities on their coins.

Thus, their "fall" can be understood primarily as the decline of independent decision-making and sovereignty, not complete elimination. The greatest challenge for these republics emerged during the Gupta period, when Samudragupta attempted to realise his imperial ambitions. Although, as stated earlier, he only made these states accept his suzerainty, he did not annex them into his empire. Their decline appears to have occurred during Chandragupta II's reign, as neither the republics' own coins nor any other inscriptional or literary evidence mentions them. The primary cause of their decline during this period was the highly ambitious and imperialist Gupta Empire. Even after the Guptas' decline, no evidence shows their resurgence, as was repeatedly seen in the pre-Gupta era. The Hun invasion is also considered a major cause of the Gupta Empire's decline. The Huns also conquered a large area, preventing the republics from reviving. The same can be said for Harshavardhana and his successors.

Conclusion

The existence of ancient Indian republics alongside monarchies is an unprecedented feature of ancient India. Buddhist literature describes the Vajji and other Sanghas within the framework of Sabhas, shared rules, and federal relations; while the Mahabharata considers factionalism and leadership crises within collective power; Panini and Kautilya document the existence of Sanghas from linguistic and statecraft perspectives, and discuss their merits and demerits. A critical study of all these sources reveals neither a universally recognised modern democracy nor a singular model of autocratic rule. Rather, a unique system of governance emerges that was neither fully democratic nor monarchical. It possessed the qualities of both and was independent of both. All members assumed the title of "king," and the Sabha's role in decision-making made it an oligarchy.

Their power lay in the Sabhas, unity, and military cooperation, and imperialists attacked these very institutions directly and indirectly to defeat them. Internal competition among expanding states like Magadha and the Mauryas gradually eroded their independence through resource-sharing, diplomacy, and confederations. Therefore, their rise and fall must be understood as a multi-factor political transformation. The utility of these republics in present-day India lies in the systems of power-sharing, assembly, and collective deliberation that have existed in various forms since ancient times.

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