



THE ANCIENT INDIAN REPUBLICS: STRENGTH AND DRAWBACKS

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Abstract:

The origin of Indian republic dates back to the 6 century B.C. The Republican trend existed through almost all aspects of life. The concept of a republic took place much earlier than that of the sabhas and samitis of the vedic age, when the western world had not even known organised political life. Ancient Indian thinkers used the term Gana or Sangh to denote the republic. The real power in this system of government lies in the hands of tribal obigarchies. The most powerful non monarchical state at this time was the Vrijian confederacy of which the chief element was the tribe of the Licchavis. The republican system was based on firm internal organisations, principals of equality , justice ,unity, material prosperity and strong military strength. A survey of the system suggests that republican form of government had faith in decentralisations of power. Perhaps this was one of the reason for the inherent weakness of the system.

KEYWORDS: Republic, Tribe, Government, Power.

In the annals of republican institutions, ancient Indian republics have distinguished themselves for certain qualities. The Indian people have left their impress upon the pages of history as the founders systems in spiritual as well as political life. Republics actually started functioning effectively during the time of the Buddha, i.e. 600 B.C. The republican trend pervaded through almost all aspects of life. The origin of the concept of a republic took place much earlier than that in the Sabhas and Samitis of the vedic age when the western hemisphere had not even known organized political life.

Republics were Synthetical Organisations: The republics of India were, artistically worked up in a way so that individual could merge his interests in the corporate life of the community without losing his individuality. Individuals and groups of different castes were living together like the fingers of one's hand, perpetually separated yet perpetually co-operating. "A sound political, economy and social life, a power and efficiency enabling a people to survive to grow and more securely towards a collective perfection and a vital elasticity and responsiveness that will give room for a constant advance in the out word expression of the mind and the spirit."

Firm Internal Organisation of the Republics

Their power of enduring the foreign invasion and threats from growing empires, gives evidence of the firm internal organisation of the republican states. Longevity of political institutions depends more or less upon the firmness of their organisation. Buddha was full of admiration for the internal organisation of the *vajjian* confederacy and he took a number of the political practices and methods prevalent among the *Licchavis* into his religious *sangha*. Moreover, its frequent meetings and ground arrangements made the Buddha to compare it with the assembly of the *Tavatimsa* Gods. In *Santiparva*, Bhimsa said to Yudhisthira that ganas united can attain material prosperity and outsiders also seek the alliance of confederate entities.

The moral assets of the republic: The strength ensuing from a sound administrative organisation creates certain moral assets which were not wanting in the Republics of India. The *sakyas* and *licchavis* of the time of the Buddha, the ganas of the time of Bhimsa and the *Ambasthas* during the time of the invasion of Alexander, were people who always acted, in matters of public interest, according to the advice of the elders. Elders-by knowledge encourage mutual subordination, behaving with complete straight forwardness to one another. Ganas prosper because they always pay due honour to their officers who are wise, heroic, enthusiastic and preserving in the execution of their duties.

Principle of Equality : The ancient India Republic were based on "Universal equality by Birth and also equality by *Kula*." The young and the old were equally represented in the *Sakyan Santhagar*, The senior did not limit the freedom of speech and expression of the Junior. Every member of the assembly had the right to vote on all public matter's. In the sphere of economy, the citizens enjoyed perfect equality of the right of adopting the profession of his choice. The republics provided, above all equality before law. Buddhist movement was the pioneer of this ideal. Equality was accepted as the basic principle of the Buddhist *Sangha* where members were admitted without discrimination between caste, creed or locality. The Superiority of the *Brahamana* and the *Kshatriya* because of high birth, was of little value in comparison to wisdom and righteousness. He concluded his conversation with these lines; "But to who is perfect in wisdom and righteousness, he is the best among Gods and, men.

Sense of Unity : The sense of fellowship and feeling of spiritual equality brought the people closer to each other and a common purpose, economic or political, bound them together to stand or fall against the exigencies of life. Unity was the most essential quality for the successful career of the republic. Bhimsa considered unity to be the most precious element of the *gana*. He said, "They fall in the clutches of the agency, when the members, driven by anger and jealousy are divided, and thus lose mutual confidence.

Sense of Justice : Above all, the qualities that added to the strength of the ancient republics was their high sense of justice. Equality before law and easy approach to the law courts was considered to be the bulwark of individual liberty. Indian republics made a remarkable advancement in the field of law on administration of justice. The administration of law and justice to the *Licchavis gana* has no other parallel in the history of the ancient world. Bhisma says that in criminal offences, justice should be administered through the President. The same eagerness for night administration of law and justice is shown by the *Buddhist sangha* which defined the supremacy of law and not that of a person.

Freedom of Opinion : Freedom of opinion in the assembly and outside was practised by the citizens of the *ganas* as one of their essential rights. Right of expression led sometime to critical situation as Sri Krishna had to face in the *Andhaka Vrsni* league. He complained to Narada that the bitter criticism of the supporters of different political groups had become unbearable for him and in answer to all his complaints, Narada advised him to adopt the policy of learn and self-restraint. This reply gives a clear indication that Sri Krishna would not spare even those who happened to be the president of the confederation.

Organisation of the Government: The *ganas* had the ideal form of executive. This organ consisted of the best who could maintain Unity, solidarity and homogeneity amongst the people. The *Vajjian* confederacy had a council of eighteen members. Even Bhimsa says that there should be a small group of leading men who would decide important policies for the *gana*. Such policies cannot be discussed in an assembly because the multitude can never keep things secret. Secrecy of administrative policies is a key to the success of a government. The republics of ancient India maintained a high standard of law and administration of justice. Different schools of *Brahmanas* studied the laws of the *Dharmasastras*. Some of them reach back to the period 600 -300 B.C. *Apastamba*, *Baudhayana*, *Gautama* and *Vasistha* have discussed some rules which are found to be parallel systems.

Material Prosperity: The political success of the *ganas* largely depended upon their material prosperity. We come across the description of the *ganas* of the Buddha's time that besides agriculture they had developed a number of trades. Due to the introduction of newer methods of production and improved conditions of transport inter course between traders had increased, which resulted in the growth of trade guilds. These guilds in course of time helped the rulers in paying salaries to the army, in financing the national development plans and in construction works. Exports of various goods of luxury from India was so high that Pliny, 'who is fond of indulging in trite homilies on Roman extravagance', is right i.e. complaining of the drain upon Roman finance caused by the India trade. This suggests that the economic condition and material prosperity of the country in general and of the western region in particular was considerably high.

Military Strength: A great reason of the political strength was that a republic was nation-in-arms. The whole community was the army. Their outstanding organisational power, tactical power and experience of battle fields made them enviable in the eyes of many foreign powers. Thus V.R. Ram Chandra Dikshitar rightly observes the political realism of a *gana* government is deeply marked in the *cara* (espionage), *mantra* (counsel), *bala* (forces) *Samadana vibhedana* (means of diplomacy) and skilled foreign policy. But then we have to admit that except in skilled foreign policy Indian republics attained distinction in all the other features.

Weakness of the Ganas : The weakness of the *gana* does not lay either in the organisation or the military power. The real danger is more internal than external because enemy can be suppressed, vanquished and kept out by a well balanced policy. But the actual danger is the internal policies created by disgruntled and disloyal sections of the organisation. They alone form the clog in the wheel of the *ganas'* progress. A *gana* divided against itself cannot be saved by military power or wealth, just as Athens in ancient Greece, divided against itself could not be saved by a wall. Bhimsa warns time and again that internal dissension is the real danger to a republic. Even

Ajatasatru's minister Varshakara tried this method to weaken the *vrijjis* before invasion. Kautilya, the most practical of Indian statesmen know how to exploit the conditions of internal disturbance of the *Ganas*.

Extreme Form of Decentralization of Power : Decentralization of power of an extreme form often led to the formation of local groups and local leadership ending in total disintegration and disuniformity. The beginning or the end of republican states can be seen in the formation of these local groups with local interest.

Lack of Sound Foreign Policy : The *gana* states developed their internal organisation and reached a standard of perfection in it but they never cared to develop a sound policy for conducting relations with neighbouring countries. Foreign policy was totally unknown to them. Naturally before encountering the larger states they could hardly imagine, how massacres and monetary losses could be saved by diplomatic Nations. These few weaknesses, inherent in the Indian republic together with some other factors paved the way for their disappearance.

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