



The prevalence of good governance practices in the Lichchhavi state and their applicability in the modern governance structure

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Abstract:

The aim of this research paper is to examine the principles underlying the republican or Gana form of government prevalent in the Lichchhavi state and seek to provide an idea of how those principles based on the ideals of social justice, consent, debate, deliberation, and the notion of equality can be employed to enhance the efficiency of the parliamentary form of government in India at the present time. The paper will attempt to study the various aspects and dimensions of this Gana form of government from the Lichchhavi state and delineate the ideals and norms of governance that the Lichchhavis propounded and utilized to govern their subjects. Through this, my paper addresses the question of identifying good governance practices from ancient Indian polity and presents a framework within which beneficial ideas from these practices can be derived to enhance transparency and accountability in our country's governing structure. The idea behind this endeavor is to shed light on the state of affairs existing in the field of polity in ancient Indian society and highlight the emergence and evolution of certain good governance mechanisms in ancient Indian polity. It is to be noted that certain good governance political



principles, such as distributive justice, equality, suffrage, and freedom of choice, were the norms of the ancient Indian political system and played an important role in the processes of political debate and deliberation, which in turn helped strengthen the roots of the earliest form of democracy. In this context, this paper examines how we can draw on our past to develop efficient government mechanisms for tackling modern governance-related challenges and issues that have come to plague our governance structure. Lichchhavi state, which is believed to be one of the earliest republics in Asia, was at the center of a transformative process with the Gana form of government, which allowed the republic to develop and employ a wide range of political processes such as debate, dissent, discussion and deliberation to arrive at the prominent decisions relating to the question of managing affairs of the state. As India, as a modern nation-state, faces acute governance-related challenges and suffers from policy bottlenecks, it should look to its ancient political system for guidance and wisdom and explore the possibility of replicating good governance practices to address the underlying governance-centric issues and to deliver on its promises to its citizenry, as it did in the past.

Keywords: Republic, Lichchhavi, Good Governance practices, Political challenges and solutions, Sustainability.

Introduction

As Indians living in modern times, we have been led to believe that it is to the Western political thinking that we owe the origin and evolution of the modern political system that is believed to be predicated on the ideas of equality, fraternity, social and distributive justice, adult franchise and democracy and that had it not been for the Western political and philosophical currents then we would not have the various forms of democratic government that we have in many countries across the world (Mohan, 1966). At the same time, we also have the tendency to assume that India as a society did not have a robust political system in the ancient period of history, nor did it know any benevolent or representative form of government, and as a result of



that the historical fallacy of India being accustomed to the autocratic and authoritarian rule since the earliest times to the modern pre-British period has been perpetuated in our collective memory. This has also led us to believe that we cannot learn anything from our ancient political system because it has nothing to offer. However, a critical study of the ancient forms of governance conducted by a cohort of nationalist historians brought to the fore the multifaceted nature of Indian polity and its system of governance. In that context, a critical outlook of the historical scholarship on the subject would reveal that India, as a society, not only had developed various forms of government, including monarchical and republican, but also devised a host of good governance practices relating to the political processes of deliberation and discussion which in turn helped Indians in terms of arriving at informed and wisdom induced decisions (Shamshastri, 1930, pp. 1-24). These decisions culminated in the development of a prudent and mature political apparatus, resulting in the general welfare of both the public and the state (Sarkar, 1921, pp.79-90). It is essential to note that the various forms of government under the Janapada system employed a wide range of political processes to establish a prudent and just governance framework for the general public and developed pragmatic governance mechanisms to address the issues and challenges related to the field of polity. Through the mechanisms of political consent and unanimity, the Indian ruling classes advanced sustainable economic policies and cohesive political activities.

History of the Janapad system and subsequent evolution of varied governance practices-

India is known to have developed a sophisticated governance framework, the roots of which can be traced to the early Vedic period in the form of the two institutions of Sabha and Samiti, which were public policy consultative bodies (Jayasawal, 1943, pp. 12- 22). This political system began to mature over time, and by the late Vedic period, it had metamorphosed into a highly comprehensive polity, marked by the emergence of numerous small republics in the northern and eastern parts of the Indian subcontinent (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184). Under the Janapada system, these republics coexisted alongside monarchies, a fact substantiated by a range of evidence, including constitutional terms, coin legends, and the testimony of ancient Greek



writers (Altekar, 1949, p. 72). As to the question of whether or not these Ganas should be equated with modern republics, it must be argued that ancient Indian Gana states should be seen as republics in the same manner in which we define the ancient states of Greece and Rome as republics (Altekar, p. 74). It is worth noting that these republics were renowned for their sophisticated governance mechanisms, which enabled them to manage their affairs efficiently and uphold the principles of equality, electoral representation, economic sustainability, distributive justice, and self-sufficiency (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184). These systems of governance were also based on the political principles of debate, discussion, deliberation, and dissent. These political processes enabled the republics to make informed and calculated decisions and choices, which in turn resulted in the delivery of better governance to the people (Mohan, 1966). The emphasis on unanimity and consensus demonstrated by these republics in settling important political, social, cultural, and religious matters during their assembly meetings denotes the efficiency of their polity (Basham, 1986, pp. 80-137). This aspect of their polity was reflected in the domains of governance and administration, which were tailored to the need to provide benevolent and effective governance to the common people.

The emergence and evolution of the Lichchhavi Republic

Lichchhavi Gana, or Republic, located in the modern-day Muzaffarpur district of Bihar, was one of the most prominent republics of ancient India, existing in harmony with other forms of government (Altekar, 1949, pp. 72-84). This small Gana is known for its administrative mechanism and constitutional machinery. The origin of this Gana can be traced back to the emergence of small trade guilds, which were autonomous trade units and consisted of traders and craftsmen (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184). These guilds had their own laws, administered their affairs independently, and did not depend on the state machinery. It is this practice that is believed to have given rise to the emergence of a number of republican states in the eastern and western parts of the Indian subcontinent. Among the numerous republics was the Lichchhavi republic, which is said to be one of the earliest republics in Asia (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184). The Lichchhavi state was a model republic in the sense that it had developed a



sophisticated form of government that allowed the state to rule its populace in accordance with the standard principles of governance in the ancient period. The republic had an assembly where it would hold meetings to discuss matters of common interest, and members of the assembly would be given the opportunity to express their views, thus enriching the entire political consultative process (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184).

In the context, it would suffice to look at some of the salient features of the Lichchhavi state's republican form of government and explore the feasibility of extracting ideas and practices from the Lichchhavi republic in order to use them for enhancing modern government practices in India at the present time.

Good governance practices of the Lichchhavi state and the feasibility of their replication in the modern Indian governance structure

As India faces tremendous challenges when it comes to delivering good governance to the Indian populace, it becomes increasingly relevant to look for out-of-the-box solutions to address the issues plaguing the whole government machinery. This warrants us to look to past governments' governing principles and ideals and examine whether it would be feasible for us to derive organic and indigenous good governance practices from them to better our modern governance structure. For the purpose of convenience, my paper will look at the republican state of the Lichchhavis and place it within the context of its theme to test its applicability and suitability for the objectives for which this work has been undertaken.

As is known from numerous sources that the central assembly of the republican state of Lichchhavi was sovereign and enjoyed absolute freedom to deal with a wide range of matters, such as the calibration of foreign affairs, appointment of foreign ambassadors, military leaders, and princes, consideration of numerous proposals and treaties and the settlement of contentious issues such as war and peace (Altekar, 1949, p. 85). In this respect, it needs to be understood that the parliament happens to be a sovereign body that vests the real power of the state in the people of the country to regulate the affairs of the country. By exercising this power, the common



citizens of the nation, irrespective of caste, class, gender, religion, or ethnicity, elect their favored representatives and send them to the parliament so that these elected members amply the voices of the constituencies and work for delivering good governance to the last person standing in Indian society. This republican form of government also has another lesson for our elected representatives: they should devise state policies and initiatives while keeping in mind the supreme interests of the common people (Jayasawal, 1943, pp. 23-161). This should enable them to realize that the real power in the country remains vested in the people and not in the Council of Ministers or any other officials. India can take a cue from the republican model of the Lichchhavi state, that there is no scope for it to galvanize power in its own hands and act in a manner inimical to the health of the Indian republic. The presence of the parliament also exhorts the will of the people to reign supreme, and authoritarianism and absolutism have no place in the country's political landscape. The very existence of a central assembly to exercise control over the executive in the Lichchhavi state supposes that there has to be a proper balance of power between the two arms of the government, and the modern executive, headed by the prime minister and his/her council of ministers, is responsible towards the Parliament as a legislative body (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184).

The central assembly had established its control over the executive through its functions of appointing its members (Altekar, 1949, pp. 81-94). To check the powers given to the executive, the central assembly was empowered to impose reasonable restrictions on the executive president and its members by holding them accountable for their actions (Altekar, 1949, p. 86). If the president or any of the executive members were found to be violating the law of the land, the assembly would take appropriate action against the culprit, either through suspension or dismissal (Altekar, 1949, p. 86). This suggests that nobody was above the rule of law, and everyone had to respect the law of the land, which was a crucial aspect of the sound governance system of Lichchhavis, implying that the responsibility of strengthening the roots of good governance lies on everyone's shoulder and this policy should be implemented to improve the efficiency of the government when it comes to delivering for the common people on the policy front by upholding the rule of law and tying the government officials and bureaucrats to



their official duties and obligations. This may go a long way towards raising and preserving the trust of the ordinary citizenry in the government of the day. Enforcing discipline among the ranks and files of the government may also streamline the administrative mechanism, thus sprucing up waste and mismanagement that have become the prime features of the utilization of public funds at present. Prompt and exemplary action against corrupt government officials and bureaucrats may set strong precedents and deter others from engaging in such unscrupulous activities, thus making better use of public money for the purposes for which it is sanctioned.

The practice of the Lichchhavi state, where the president of the state presided over the assembly and supervised its functioning with the utmost impartiality and earnestness, should be inferred as exemplifying the role of the major leaders to remain oblivious to the human characteristics of prejudice and partiality (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184). The practice further suggests that there were elaborate provisions for discussing issues of common interest with sincerity and prudence. After or during the course of the debate, everyone was given a chance to express their dissent or move amendments. Besides, the resolution was to be moved, and the debate followed (Altekar, 1949, p. 88). At the same time, there were rules of procedure and norms regarding the method of conducting meetings in the Lichchhavi Republic (Jayasawal, 1943, pp. 90-101). This gives us an idea of how we should conduct cordial proceedings in the two houses of parliament to maximize the benefits of transacting the business of the houses at present. This also puts emphasis on the importance of seeking consensus in the house while dealing with matters of public interest, thus underscoring the significance of the principle of representation and referendum in a republican form of government. Doing so will undoubtedly foster a spirit of harmony and concord among the members of the house, propelling them to work in a manner that will be beneficial to the cause of good governance.

The study of the franchise system, though limited, and its applicability in the case of the Lichchhavi state, speaks volumes about the importance of empowering the common people to have a decisive role in shaping public policies and actions (Jayasawal, 1943, pp. 90-101). This aspect of the ancient Indian polity suggests that there was a broader understanding among the



Lichchhavis that the people's voices could be amplified and respected only when the people themselves were given the right to choose their representatives, who, in turn, would represent them at the highest political body (Jayasawal, 1943, pp. 102-104). The essence of the message that we can infer from this past practice underlines that every eligible person should be enabled to participate in elections and strengthen the roots of the parliamentary democracy in modern India without fear or favor. This provision will help cement the bond between the electorate and democracy, thus paving the way for winning the hearts and minds of the people, which happens to be one of the major objectives of good governance. Franchising the eligible people will also enhance the participation of the general public in fostering a more pronounced consultative process and making informed choices about grasping and appreciating the dynamics of the governance mechanism. Besides, allowing people to vote to make their choices known will help eliminate any feelings of alienation and build bridges between the commoners and the government, thus directing the course of the government machinery on the path to peace and prosperity.

In addition to other branches of government governing different aspects of life, the Lichchhavis also had a robust judiciary in place, the task of which was to punish criminals and dispense justice to the victims. For this purpose, they seem to have developed a digest of laws and used it to try cases and settle disputes among the local populace. Although we do not have direct references to the rules and procedures through which the Lichchhavis adjudicated their judiciary, we have various historical sources that tell us how Kulakas used to deal with both criminal and civil matters (Bhandarkar, 1919, pp. 140-184). These kulakas were specific groups of people belonging to the Kshatriya caste, and their rules were applied specifically to their community members. However, their kind perusal allows us to realize the sophistication of the judicial system, which was aimed at providing swift justice to the people without losing precious time (Jayasawal, 1943, pp. 105-106). This also emphasizes the nature and characteristics of the police system dedicated to maintaining law and order by curbing crime and corruption. Through this, we can undoubtedly gauge the efficiency and efficacy of the judicial administration prevailing in the Lichchhavi state. This aspect of ancient Indian polity will help us derive a



crucial lesson that we must make sincere efforts to ramp up our judiciary to act as a solid pillar of justice and liberty. Our courts should be courageous enough to protect both rich and poor alike while punishing those who engage in acts of violence and discrimination. Our judiciary should step up its efforts to curb the excesses of the rich and influential and establish justice and a level playing field for all. It is also the judiciary's responsibility to ensure that it upholds the civil and moral rights of the country's people by checking arbitrary government decisions and acts and holding the government accountable for its actions and policies.

Conclusion

Contrary to the idea that India did not develop a benevolent form of government and that Indians never enjoyed or benefited from any good governance, the paper highlights that Indians were able to devise various forms of benevolent government that engaged in the general welfare of the common people with their good governance practices. These good governance practices were driven by the ideas of transparency, accountability, and efficiency, which resulted in the state establishing self-sufficiency and economic stability. The paper suggests that these governance models should not just be studied; rather, efforts should be made to derive essential lessons and practices that can be replicated to address governance-related challenges that India continues to face as a modern nation-state. It must be remembered that India has a very rich history with vast good governance practices and mechanisms, and it is only proper that we make attempts to not only appreciate such ideals but also examine the possibility of how these ideals can be implemented to strengthen our governance structure. The ancient Indian states, which were both monarchical and republican, stand before us as repositories of ancient Indian knowledge systems with remarkable features in diverse fields such as law, polity, religion, administration, economy, culture, and the like, and it is only fitting that we look to our past for wisdom and guidance so that we can tackle enormous governance issues and uphold the ideals of social and distributive justice, equality, economic sustainability and freedom which we know are the bedrocks of a resilient civilization like India. The history of our ancient governance system is replete with instances when our ancestors tackled administrative obstacles, addressed economic



challenges, and built resilience and strength, allowing them to create a more just and equitable society. So, in this context, it would only be natural to suggest that we should derive inspiration from the good governance practices of our history and utilize the ancient governance mechanisms to plug the modern governance-related loopholes with the aim of winning the hearts and minds of the Indian populace. The good governance practices that are embedded in the old Janapada systems can be utilized to offer good governance to the common people by building bridges between them and the government.

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