



Examining the Ancient Gana-Sangha's: An Indigenous Epistemology for Sustainable Governance in Contemporary Times

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Abstract:

Post-colonial studies have highlighted that one of the greatest challenges that face the erstwhile colonies is to recover a sense of self amidst the imposition of Western ideals as the only organic one, for although Colonialism as a rule is a matter of the past, the colonization of the mind continues. While the impact of colonialism pervades, even if subterraneously, almost all aspects of the colonized society, its most visible and visceral impact is in the discourse of politics and governance. It therefore becomes imperative for the nation to recover, reinterpret and apply its ancient and indigenous models of governance to address the lacunas that are created by the grafting, in toto, of the Western model of rule and governance in India. It is in light of this that the following paper aims to examine the ancient Indian system of Janapadas, especially Gana-Sanghas, as an indigenous model of good and sustainable governance. The following study will examine the Gana-Sangha system at two levels, first at a theoretical level, whereby the study will emphasize how this ancient system can be located as the indigenous epistemology of governance



and polity that both questions the claims of universality of the Western epistemology as well as addresses and redresses the gaps created by blind application of the Western epistemology of the polity and rule in non-western societies. Thus, an examination of the working of the Gana-Sanghas can help in expanding and reorienting the nomenclature of rule, governance and authority and allow for the formulation of a more responsive theory of governance. At the second level, the paper will highlight how several aspects of the functioning of the sangha's can help achieve the goal of sustainable governance. Thus, the method of debating and discussing an issue to reach consensus, the use of voting to break an impasse, all these highlight the sustainable essence of the Gana-Sangha system, which has ample scope to address the goals of local self-governance, allowing for large participation and effective dilution of power away from concentration and towards effective and accountable authority. The paper also explores how Gana-Sangh's conception of land and resource, whereby while land is understood politically but still not with the aggressive authority of ownership rather with communal sanctity, can be developed as a local model of governance in resource critical areas, and by providing a way of devolution of power can help in better participation of population in the niches of the nation and thus strengthen the bonds of the nation. Thus, the paper, through its examination of the Gana-Sanghas, highlights how it can help enrich the indigenous epistemology of polity and contribute to the broader discourse of Power, Governance and Justice. As well as address the gaps not addressed or even created by the Western epistemology, and provide models for sustainable governance and resource management.

Key Words: Gana-Sangha, Decolonization, Indigenous, Epistemology, Sustainability.

Introduction:

Writing in an article in 1909, Sri Aurobindo argues that “Our political activity has crept into a channel cut for it by European and Europeanized minds... and is thus deficient in depth and volume.” (Aurobindo, 1997, p.18). This remark of Sri Aurobindo throws light on the critical and long-standing debate on decolonizing the mind, as an essential step in decolonization is, first and



foremost, to identify the epidermal sites of colonization, which have sustained ideological colonization even in the absence of a corporeal one. As it is, these subterranean loci of colonization that influence the actions and discourses today.

One of the key accusations made against colonized societies was that they were societies sans political theory, societies lacking an original and comprehensive idea of governance, of polity (Banerjee, 2020, pp. 23-25). While the national discourse at the time constantly questioned this idea, even in criticism, the acceptance of the West as the hub of good governance practices persists, until today, largely unscathed.

It is in light of this that the following paper aims to steer the discussion on the very idea of good governance, as it occupies the contemporary political thought, towards the Janapada, primarily the Gana Sangha system of ancient times, and juxtapose it with the debates on both decolonization of political epistemology as well as relate it to the ideals of sustainable and good governance practices.

The intent is to examine good governance practices in the ancient Indian Janapada system as an endeavour akin to salvaging the rich yet lost political discourse of India. As a study of the governance practices in ancient India questions the power of historiography, which has long denied the presence of polity and governance as a craft and science in ancient India, and thus is a step forward in decolonizing the political epistemology, consciousness and practices.

The following paper, therefore, through its examination of the nature of governance in ancient Indian Gana-Sanghas, aims to highlight the presence of a rich, antique and indigenous epistemology of polity and governance, which can help enrich the entire discourse on polity and governance, but also at the same time help in better governance practices in contemporary India. Thus, serving the dual task of decolonizing the politics and at the same time re-politicizing along indigenous and sustainable lines.

Tracing the Origins: Setting the Socio-Historical Landscape



In the historical landscape, the Sixth Century BCE is marked as a major turning point. The period witnessed a phase of urbanization after the collapse of the Harappan cities; it was also a time of philosophical and religious ferment, with the rise of new ideas such as Buddhism and Jainism. It was also a period that witnessed the growth of state societies, i.e., Janapadas and the emergence of many cities, i.e., Mahanagaras, that still hold cultural sway in the subcontinent. (Singh, 2008, p. 257; Thapar, 2002, p.137).

At the helm of these economic, religious and social ferment was the growth and spread of the Janapadas, which emerged in the 6th-5th Century BCE, stretching from Gandhara in the north-west to Anga in eastern India. (Singh, pp.260-262). Narendra Wagle, in his work *Society at The Time of the Buddha* defines a Janapada as a socio-cultural region, a structural entity consisting of various sub-units which starts from vanna (forest) and ends with residential units of gama (village or hamlets), nigama (towns), nagaras (cities). (Wagle, 1995, p. 31). The term Janapada forms with two terms: jana, that is, a clan or a group and pada, meaning their settlement or foothold. This aspect of the emergence of Janapadas from the early settlement of various clans in different regions is highlighted by Romila Thapar in her work *Early India*, as she examines how permanent settlement in a particular area gave geographical identity to a clan or a confederacy of clans. While Thapar uses the denomination of a clan to understand the nature and structure of the communities that eventually emerged into janapadas, Wagle, in his work, argues that the structure of Janapada can be better understood by looking at them as “extended kin- groups”, consisting of a common, real or imagined, descent, folkways, culture and territory. (Wagle, p.37.)

The presence of these Janapada is mentioned not just in indigenous sources but is also referenced in the Greek and Roman sources. For instance, Arrian’s *Anabasis of Alexander* describes Alexander meeting the free and independent communities at every turn. One such was the city of Nysa, at the border of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was ruled by a president and a council of 300 men (Mulhberger, pp. 3- 4).

While there emerged many different city-states and janapadas, among them sixteen of the Janapadas gained prominence as Mahajanpadas. These Mahajanpadas, known as solasa-



Mahajanpada, are mentioned in Buddhist and Jain sources of the time. A principal Buddhist text, the Anguttara Nikaya gives the names of the Mahajanpadas. These were – Kasi, Kosala, Anga, Magadha, Vajji/Vrijji, Malla, Chetiya/Chedi, Vatsa/Vamsa, Kuru, Panchala, Matsya, Shurasena, Assaka/Ashmaka, Avanti, Gandhara and Kamboja. (Singh, p. 261).

The relationship between these Mahajanpadas kept fluctuating and was marked by conflict as well as cooperation, for instance the Kosala Mahajanpada expanded by absorbing Kasi, and the rise of Magadha to prominence was also followed by the successful conquest of the surrounding Janapadas. (Thapar, p.138; Singh, p. 262). Besides the political aspect, these Mahajanpadas also played a crucial role in the expansion of a sophisticated urban economy and trade, as they produced many cities which were hubs of production and exchange, and grew owing to their location on important trade routes such as the city of Ujjain. (Thapar, p. 139) The city of Champa, the capital of Mahajanpada of Anga, was also an important commercial centre. (Singh, p. 262)

These Janapadas were also significant in the rise and promotion of new thoughts and ideas, thus both Jainism and Buddhism emerged and flourished amongst these Mahajanpadas, especially gana-sanghas. Mahavira belonged to the Jnatika clan based in Kundapura, located in the suburbs of Vaishali. Gautam Buddha too belonged to the Sakya Clan of Lichchhavis. (Singh, p. 263).

These Janapadas thus flourished as centres of administration, cultural and social sophistication as well as economic growth and expansion, it was only with the rise of the Magdha vis-à-vis other Janapadas, and its expansion by engulfing the surrounding Janapadas that they started to weaken and give way to Empires. However, the Janapadas persisted until the Guptas, as Gupta Emperor Samudragupta is referred to as *Lichchhavi-dauhitra* i.e grandson of the Lichchhavis¹ and it was in fact Samudragupta's expansion that finally led to the fall of the Lichchhavis and the last remaining Janapadas.(Singh, p. 476)

¹ This title of Lichchhavi- dauhitra appears on the Allahabad Prashasti of Samudragupta. Samudragupta was son of Emperor Chandragupta and his wife Kumaradevi, who was a Lichchhavi Princess, hence Samudragupta was refereed to as grandson of Lichchhavis.



Thus the above examination helps to shed light on the emergence of the Janapads in the Indian history, by locating the Janapads on the historical landscape the above examination sets the ground for the examination of the nature of governance of the gana-sanghas that were a type of Janapadas, and explore the prevalence of sustainable governance practices that can be traced back to ancient India, suggesting not just indiginity but also antiquity to ethos of sustainable governance in Indian History.

The Governance practice of the Gana- Sanghas - The Ethos of Unanimity and Consensus.

Let me begin the discussion with a fundamental, albeit nuanced and debated, point that a discourse in itself is neither innocuous nor aloof from the context and power relations from which it emanates and in which it is enmeshed. (Said, 1991, pp.5-6) Any and every knowledge is political; its creation intensely so, and it serves a purpose. (Fabian, 1983, pp. 6-12).

This relationship between knowledge and power is all the more profound in studying how knowledge of the past creates the past that is remembered amongst all that is forgotten or erased. Romila Thapar in her work *Early India*, thus argues that a study of Historiography becomes a prelude to understanding history as a form of knowledge. (Thapar, 2002, p. xviii) The influence of knowledge, as created and selective in shaping the understanding of one's past, and consequently oneself, is most profoundly reflected in how we see our own political history. As the colonial idea of Oriental Despotism, the cornerstone of which was obscene centralization, arbitrariness sans accountability, and absence of sophisticated gradations, continues to exist in the subconscious of many erstwhile colonies, which seek to imitate the political ideas and rhetoric of the West, accepting that they lack one of their own.

Therefore, out of many things that colonization did, one was to purge India of any indigenous models and theories of governance, let alone good governance. Such arguments were however, met with severe criticism by scholars who highlighted the prevalence of a sophisticated and diverse system of governance in Ancient India. Pioneer in the field was D.R Bhandarkar, who in his



lectures on *Some Aspects of Ancient Hindu Polity* highlights that even before Kautilya's Arthashastra, *Dandniti*, or polity had developed as a distinct and rich science and craft. He thus locates Kautilya's Arthashastra as a part of a long chain of works on polity and statecraft. Bhandarkar highlights the antiquity of polity as a distinct discourse in Ancient India by highlighting that polity is traditionally attributed to God Brahma. He shows that Chapter 59 of the *Shantiparva* of the Mahabharata shows that Brahmadeva brought out a long treatise on *tri-varga* that is Dharma, Artha and Kaam. This treatise ran into one hundred thousand chapters, which were subsequently reduced by Shiva, Brihaspati and Ushana. (Bhandarkar, 1929, pp. 4-7). What Bhandarkar does is to highlight the antiquity of political discourse in India.

A study of ancient India does not just help trace the antiquity of political thought in India but also sheds light on the multiplicity and diversity of political thoughts and ways of socio-political organizations that co-existed since antiquity. The prevalence of *Gana-Sanghas* alongside the monarchy testifies to the multiplicity of governance models that existed, rather, co-existed in ancient India. (Thapar, 2002)

It is the nature of governance of the Gana Sanghas that our paper will focus on. Rhys David and K.P Jayaswal were among the earliest scholars who studied these gana sanghas and termed them republics. Jayswal argues that while these gana sanghas cannot be termed as republics in the modern sense of the term, they were republics just like Ancient Greek republics, as power was not vested with one but was exercised by many. (Jayaswal, 1943).

The presence of these gana sanghas is noted not just in indigenous records such as Buddhist texts, Arthshastra and Mahabharata, but is also found in foreign accounts. As Greek accounts post Alexander's invasion make a frequent mention of "autonomous cities" in the Indus plain. This indicates the continuing presence of a variety of Gana Sanghas in the region. Thapar argues that the persistence of Gana Sanghas in Indian history was a remarkable feature, as it shows the resilience of the non-monarchical forms of administration. (Thapar, pp. 137-38)



Even within Janapada, there was no singularity of model of governance; there were differences and diversity based upon the region and customs of the people inhabiting it. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, in his work, observes that a detailed study of the ancient texts and Janapada reflects a 'currency of different policies, practices and customs' (Chattopadhyaya, 2015, p. 8). The argument intends to highlight the diversities of polities that existed in ancient India, especially within the broader category of Janapada, that were specific to region, people and customs, suggesting governance from below, and not just imposed from above. M.K Sharan, too, in his study of numismatics, classifies three forms of administration these are Gana, Nigama and Janapada. Through his study of the coins of different Janapada he argues that the emphasis of the Janapada was on locality. (Sharan, 1972) As in the beginning they called themselves Janapada, but by the 4th century A.D they started to call themselves Ganas, which denoted a non-monarchical form of government. What is revealed is a rich plurality of polities, models of organizations, and governance.

The highlighting feature of the Gana Sanghas was that, unlike in a monarchy, in the Gana Sanghas, power and sovereignty were not vested in singularity but were plurally held. There was a corporate element of rule. K. P Jayswal has examined the nature of the working of Gana Sanghas by drawing parallels with the Buddhist Sangha, as he argues that the Buddhist Sangha was inspired and modelled upon these political sanghas. (Jayaswal, 1943; Thapar, 2002, pp. 146)

The administration and the judicial matters were carried out in a public assembly at which young and old were present. This assembly hall was known as *Santhagara*. (Davids, 1955, p.11) The Ekapanna Jataka states that in the Lichchhavi capital of Vaishali, there were 7,707 rajas to govern the kingdom, and a smaller number of *uprajas*, *senapatis* and *bhandagarikas*.²(Singh, 2018, p.267). What appears, therefore, is that power was not centralised in one but was horizontally spread. The assembly was led by a chief which was not a hereditary position.

² *Uprajas* refer to Subordinate kings, *Senapatis* are military commanders and *bhandagarikas* refer to treasurers.



Jayaswal notes that in the assembly, a motion known as *natti* was moved and presented as a resolution known as *Pratijina*. The idea was to arrive at decisions by consensus and unanimity. All those in support of the resolution were to keep silent while those in opposition could speak. A resolution was repeated three times. (Jayaswal, p.90)

Failing to reach a consensus, a vote was taken. Thus, when the capital of the Sakyas was besieged by the Kosala, opinions were divided in the assembly, and a vote was taken, and it was decided to capitulate. The opinion of the greater number decided the matter known as *bahutara*.³ (Jayaswal, 1943) Scholars have highlighted that a detailed and well-developed system of voting existed. The voting was carried out with the help of voting tickets known as *Salakas* or pins. The process of voting was known as *Salakagrahana*. The entire process of voting was supervised by an officer known as *sala-gahapaka*, who was chosen by the sangha on account of his honesty and impartiality. (Singh, p. 267)

Another officer, known as *Gana-puraka*, was responsible for ensuring that a lawful quorum of the assembly was met, as any decision arrived without the necessary quorum was considered invalid. (Jayaswal, p.93)

Thus, even a cursory look at the prevalent methods of governance in the Gana Sanghas highlights that there was a well- developed system of decision-making that was based on the ethos of consensus and unanimity and sought to voting as a method of breaking impasse. This corporate system of governance and administration was one of the key strengths of the gana- sanghas. (Thapar, 148) It was these methods prevalent in the Gana Sangha that inspired the Buddhist Sangha system. (Omvedt, 2001, pp. 1802-1803) The nature of governance in the Gana Sanghas, therefore, reflects a balance between the concentration and distribution of power in Ancient India.

³ *Bahutara* translates to majority, or larger share.



The Sangha's judicial process was also highly developed. The *Atthakatha* and *Sumangalavilasani*, commentaries on the Buddhist canon, offer a glimpse into the administration of law among the Vrijjis. When a person was found guilty, he was sent to a gradation of officers from *Vinischaya Mahamatra* to *Vyavaharika*, then to *Sutradhara*, *Ashta-kulika*, *Senapti*, *Uprajan* and finally to *Rajan*.⁴ (Bhandarkar, 1929, pp.110) The guiding impulse being that while any of the officers could acquit, only the highest could punish, and only after due diligence. Thus, if the person was found guilty, he was sent to the higher officer, finally to *Rajan*, who passed the judgment from the Book of Precedents. (Davids, 1955, p.13) Therefore, ensuring that there were gradations of checks before punishing a person. The laws of the gana were called *Samaya*, which literally translates to a decision or a resolution arrived at an assembly. (Jayaswal, 1943, p.106)

What emerges is the picture of a detailed and scrupulous system of governance which was laden with the ethos of unanimity; the intent was to build consensus, and in case of an impasse, seek to vote as a method to arrive at decisions. The nature of criminal law, as seen in the case of Gana Sangha, too reflects a developed system of jurisprudence, seen in the presence of Books of Precedence and the gradation of officers. All these reflect that the Ancient Janapada system was marked by many practices that can be termed as good governance practices and become extremely relevant in contemporary times. It is this aspect that the next section will examine.

Contemporary relevance of ancient practices of Gana-Sanghas- Sustainable Reorientation of Governance, State and Power.

The examination of the Janapada system and the nature of governance does not just enrich the theoretical discourse but also merits examination of its own, owing to its applicability in contemporary times. With the ethos of accountable local governance based on a devolution of power at different levels, corporate decision-making that provided scope for checks and balances, and the ethos of collective property, the governance practices of the gana sanghas come as

⁴ The name of these officers reflects an ascending order of hierarchy of officers starting from a lower officer and ending at the *Rajan*, that is, the king himself.



extremely relevant in contemporary times and especially in the context of sustainable governance. It is thus the aim of the section to examine the practical and contemporary relevance of the governance practices of the ancient Gana Sanghas.

The relevance of the gana-sanghas in the contemporary discourse on sustainable governance emanates from the conceptualization of the nature and inception of the State, its relation to people and governance that it reflects, and through it helps to flesh out what can be called the indigenous theory of state in ancient India.

The Gana sanghas, with their understanding of polity as not a mere exercise of power but an exercise to govern, and the king not as a divine rendition but a socially selected person for a social role, inspired the Sangas set up by Lord Buddha. Thus, the Buddhist theory of *Mahasamanta*, the Great Chosen One, is one of the earliest theories of the state as emerging out of social contract and in so doing, it does not just provide for the origin of the state but also locates the role of power and authority as one to ensure order and protection. It sees the King as the first social servant and ultimately dependent on the suffrage of his subjects. (Basham, 2004, p.72) This idea of Mahasamanta is reflective of the nature of exercise of authority in Gana, whereby even if power was in the hands of a few, it was to ensure smooth administration and maintain social cohesion.

This nature of governance in Gana Sangha helps to delve into the contemporary debates on balancing devolution of power with accountable and responsive local governance. Thapar argues that authority for routine function was rarely entirely concentrated at the centre in the Indian political Systems. She further argues that theories such as ‘Oriental Despotism’ overlook the fact that authority was localized through various institutions such as guilds, urban and village councils. (Thapar, 2002)

This localization of authority allowed modification in the notion of governance based on local requirements. The localization of authority based on devolution of power ensures an effective and resilient system of administration, which is also at the same time accountable. The effectiveness of the devolution of power can be best gauged when one examines that even within the gana



sanghas, the villages managed their own local affairs. Rhys Davids notes that the local affairs of each village were carried on in an open assembly. (Davids, 1955).

What is the most significant aspect of the village administration within gana sangha is the nature of managing natural resources. David notes that in the Sakya territory, the villages were grouped around the rice fields, and the cattle wandered through the outlying forest, over which all peasantry, all Sakiyas, by birth had rights of common. (Davids, 1955, p.12) Communal ownership of land had been a key aspect of the gana-sanghas, and the way in which land was held and controlled intimately determined the form of the government. (Murari, 2007). Thus, the ethos of ownership and governance informed each other, the same spirit permeating both.

The ethos of collective management of critical resources such as pastures, grasslands and woodlands, as seen in the village administration, reflects an effective way of local management of resources and, in contemporary times, can be extremely effective in better management of natural resources in resource-critical areas as well as regions in the niche of the nation. Such collective management would empower communities and regions at the fringes, allowing for a sustainable utilization of resources.

While this collective ownership empowers local communities, it also shows how a balanced devolution of power and not centralization has been the norm. Local participation empowers communities and at the same time can be used as a key to strengthen the participatory democratic goals of the nation by accommodating masses and localities by giving them stakes in governance and administration. The emphasis on accommodation of diversity, in contrast to the homogenizing impulse, as seen in various instances noted in ancient Indian texts, both normative and otherwise (Chattopadhyaya, 2015, p. 8), becomes extremely relevant in fulfilling the goal of a democratic, sustainable governance that is incorporative. This would create a desired balance between rights and duties, power and accountability, which is the milestone of an effective democracy.

This devolution of power for management of local affairs has always been a precedent in Indian Civilization, and it highlights that concern with governance was not just limited to theoretical abstractions but was responsive and proactive based on dealing with everyday situations and local



requirements. Thus, showing how practicality was a key feature of the governance practices in Ancient India.

Conclusion

To conclude, an examination of the nature of governance in the Janapada acts as a vantage point to examine multiple related concerns. Firstly, it helps to appreciate the antiquity of politics as a distinct and well-developed discourse in Indian Civilization. It shuns any idea that politics and political theory developed in India only as a rejoinder to the colonial rule, instead it shows the depth, richness and practicality of the indigenous political epistemology. The presence of gana sanghas alongside monarchies underlines that politics and governance in India were never bound by a singularity of model, instead were marked by a richness of multiplicity.

The ethos of corporate governance, based on practices such as decisions being taken via motions and resolutions moved in an assembly, the recourse to voting as a method to break an impasse, reflects the prevalence of good governance practices in Ancient India and is also at the same time exceedingly relevant in contemporary times.

A recurrent theme in the governance practice of the Janapada is that authority was very strategically graded at different levels, which allowed for a localization of authority, ensuring effective and responsive administration. This shows how the essence of local and mass participation had been in practice in ancient India.

This gradation is also witnessed at the level of dispensing justice, which shows that deliberation and not arbitrariness was the norm, the example of the Vrijs justice system where any one could acquit but to punish a person was sent to highest possible authority who in return referred to a Book of Precedence, shows that a keen sense of justice and jurisprudence was prevalent in the ancient Janapada.



Even if there was effective localization of power there was at the same time an understanding of the need for some control of power at a larger level, this need of necessary control is best reflected in the Buddhist theory of State based on the concept of the Mahasamanta, the Great Chosen One, as it reflects the sociological need for some centralized control to offer protection and order. This theory of state and authority emerging as a result of the Social Contract to ensure order is complemented by the theory of dis-order and chaos reflected in the concept of *Matsyanyaya* (Basham, pp.75) *Matsyanyaya*, which suggests that in a situation of anarchy and chaos, the bigger and the more powerful person preys on the smaller and the weaker one, like the bigger fish that preys on the smaller one. This theory of anarchy suggests the need for some effective and centralized control so as to ensure order and evade anarchy.

These theories and concepts show that there existed in Ancient India the idea of State, power and governance. The good governance practices of Gana Sangha can play a significant role in meeting the goals of contemporary India by ensuring sustainable democratic governance. What India needs, therefore, is to undertake an archaeology of its rich political discourse and resuscitate and remodel it to make an indigenous model of governance to meet the needs of the present times.

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