

Vedic Political Thought and Today's India

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Abstract

Ancient India was not a democracy in the modern sense of the term. The king ruled, but he was not an autocrat. There was division of power. The king, a member of the Kshatriya clan, was advised by a council of elders, usually Brahmins; the finances were provided by the Vaishyas (business and agriculture), and the foot-soldiers were often the Shudras. Thus, all four varnas were important part of the ruling system. We cannot build a political system purely on the Vedic model, but we can learn from it.

Full Paper

There was high regard for a dharmic life and governance in Vedic or ancient India. A word once given must be obeyed. King Daśaratha exiled Prince Rāma to the forest because of the word given by him to Kaikeyi. Rāma followed Dharma and accepted his fate, even though Jābali, a minister at the court, tried to dissuade him from exile to the forest. Yudhiṣṭhira would not tell a lie. Battles were fought during day-light hours, and also only among the combatants. Civilians were not harmed. There are no instances of wholesale massacre of civilian populations. Defeated enemy was allowed to escape. The rules did break down during war in some instances, as these did in Mahābhārata.

A. Vedic India

Ṛṣis or sages exercised great influence on royal authority. Viśvāmitra upbraided King Daśarath, as did *Ṛṣis* Kaṇva upbraided King Duṣyanta. Yājñavalkya had a celebrated presence at King Janak's court. *Ṛṣis* were not always for the renunciation. Yājñavalkya for example was married to Maitreyi and Kātyāyanī.

No formal theory of the state survives from ancient India. *Artha-śāstra* written by Kauṭilya or Chāṇakya, the minister to Chandragupta Maurya, is an exception. Snippets of political theory are also found in the Rāmāyaṇa, the Śanti Purva of the Mahābhārata and in Kālidāsa's plays.

Kingship, not a republic, was the major form of the state in ancient India. Kings inherited their office through primogeniture, mostly. A disabled, sick or maimed prince could not ascend the throne. Dhṛtarāṣṭra was blind and therefore could not rule. When the younger brother Pāndu retired to the forest and abdicated in favor of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the legitimacy of the royal line was in dispute. Kings claimed frequently a divine origin. Chola kings in southern India were worshipped like gods. Surya-vanṣī and Chandra-vanṣī were two leading royal lines.

Kings were usually Kashatriyas. But Brahmin, Vaishya or Shudra kings were also known. King Harsha (590-647 AD) was a Vaishya, as reported by Chinese monk Hsuan Tsang (now spelled as Zuan Zang). Nanda (5th C BC) was said to be a Shudra. A few women also ruled: Didda of Kashmir in the 10th century is one such example. The Malabar kings in Kerala followed a matrilineal descent. The sister's son ascended the throne.

B. Royal Power

1. Ancient India practiced a system of separation of powers through the *varna* system.

- The kings were Kṣatriyas
- The advisors and ministers were Brāhminā
- The financiers were Vaiśya
- The body-guards and foot-soldiers were mostly Shūdra

Political power was thus dispersed, not concentrated in one caste, or in one group of people. As noted previously, the *varṇa* system was not iron-clad.

C. Small-Scale Kingdoms

During most of its history before the advent of Islam, India was divided into a number of principalities, some were large others small. The few imperial dynasties included: the Nandas (424-321 BCE), the Mauryan Empire (321-185 BCE), the Gupta Empire (308 AD-500 AD), the Harsha Empire (590-647 AD).

Small city states during Lord Buddha's time, about 500 BC: Much information on the nature of the polity is available in the *Jātaka* stories of Buddha's life. Monarchy was the usual form of government, though there were some oligarchic and aristocratic forms also. Some kings were probably elected to their office. The *Eka-panna Jātaka* states that the Licchavi state capital of Vaiśālī had 7,707 *rājās* to govern the kingdom. Here *rājā* may mean a senator or a member of parliament. Important states during Buddha's time included: Licchavi, Magadha, Mallas, Videha, Koshala, Sakya, Koliya, Moniya, Kaalaama and the Vajjian or the Vrij Confederacy.

Is smallness bad? The division of India into numerous small principalities has come up for much criticism. Large scale empires have been praised, especially by European historians. One of the virtues of the British rule is said to be India's unification. Much ado is made of bigness.

But bigness is not always good, nor smallness always bad. The Soviet Empire (1917-1991) was big but not good. The Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb reached its zenith, but was draconian. The record of the British Empire as a source for human welfare in India is mixed. The British rule hurt India's economy. India controlled 25 pct of the global trade in 1700 and a mere 2 pct when the British left in 1947.

The Greek civilization reached its height in Athens, Sparta, Corinth and Argos, all small city states. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Epicurus, Heraclites--all were the product of small city states, not large empires. Each city-state (*polis*) had its own personality, goals, laws and customs. Greece was politically divided and yet culturally unified. Greeks all worshiped the same gods. They all spoke the same language. So was also the case of India of ancient days. Sri Aurobindo provides the following argument in his: *The Ideal of Human Unity*.¹

'It must be remembered that a greater social or political unity is not necessarily a boon in itself . . . Modern Europe owes two-thirds of its civilisation to three such supreme moments of human history, . . . the little nation of the Jews, the many-sided life of the small Greek city states, the similar, though more restricted,

artistic and intellectual life of mediaeval Italy. . .Nor was any age in Asia so rich in energy, so well worth living in, so productive of the best and most enduring fruits as that heroic period of India when she was divided into small kingdoms, many of them no larger than a modern district. Her most wonderful activities, her most vigorous and enduring work, that which, if we had to make a choice, we should keep at the sacrifice of all else, belonged to that period; the second best came afterwards in larger, but still comparatively small, nations and kingdoms like those of the Pallavas, Chalukyas, Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras..’

D, Secularism and Pluralism in Ancient India

Secularism and pluralism are not Western inventions. Pluralism and tolerance of diversity is an abiding feature of the Indian tradition. Different philosophical doctrines have always existed side by side in India. India’s motto through history has been: Let hundred flowers bloom; let hundred ideas contend.

Ekam sat, viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti//
Truth is one; the sages call it by various names.

Ancient India was the home to three major religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Atheists and agnostics also existed in India. The *Chārvāka* School and *Lokayats* represented the atheistic tradition. Gautama Buddha lived to the ripe old age of 80. So did Mahāvīra, the founder of Jain religion. They were not persecuted. They lived full lives. Contrast the situation with that in Israel or the Middle East. Jesus was crucified at the tender age of 33. Muhammad had to flee from Mecca to Medina in 622 to escape being killed in Mecca.

In contrast, luminaries in India debated and argued with one another without resorting to arms. The weaker parties were not persecuted, nor their sacred books burned. Even atheists joined the debates. Pluralism and tolerance of diversity is an abiding feature of the Indian tradition. A smaller number of Christians, Parsees and Jews also found home in India. Jews entered India in the first century after the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in 70 A. D. The Jews were scattered to the far corners of the earth. Parsees entered India in the 7th century after their homeland in Persia was overrun by the Muslim armies. A small number of Arab merchants settled in Cochin in Southern India in the 7th century. Later, Muslims entered India in waves with the invading armies in the Middle Ages.

Nathan Katz tells us that India is the only country where the Jews were not persecuted. This is a bold statement. In his book titled *Who are the Jews of India?* Nathan Katz writes: “The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora.”² Both Christians and Jews have lived in a predominant Hindu India for centuries without being persecuted.

E. The Tradition of Debate

Pluralism and respect for diversity gave rise to a tradition of debate. The history of debate and skepticism can be traced to the earliest scripture in India, the Vedas. The creation hymn in the *Ṛgveda* (10.129) asks: “whence it all came; how creation happened?” The answer provided in the scripture is not dogmatic or closed-ended but tentative. *Bhagavad Gītā* is a dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. It is not a monologue; it is not a sermon. There are no commandments, nor “thou shalt not” in the *Gītā*.

Rāmāyaṇa carries forward the tradition of debate. A minister named Jāvali argues with Prince Rāmā to defend his own interest, forsaking empty arguments about Dharma. “I pity those who give themselves up especially to that which is meritorious, disregarding their own interest. Pious men say, the 8th day should be given up to sacrifices for the spirits of our ancestors. The food that is offered is wasted. Can the dead eat? If that which is eaten here could enter the body of another, then let a sacrifice be offered for those who are setting out on a distant journey and they will not need any provisions! ³ Rama, you should take the throne.” Rama rejected Jāvali’s argument.

Women are not absent from the Hindu tradition of debate. Gārgī was a fierce debater as reported in the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad. She challenged Yājñavalkya on the finer points of Vedic interpretations. Sītā, the very personification of sacrifice and wifely duties, berates Rāmā for refusing to take her to the forest. She upbraids her husband, using strong language. She calls Rāmā ‘weak and indecisive’ . -‘What could my father, the Lord of Mithila, have had in mind when he took you for son-in-law, Rama, a woman with the body of a man?’⁴ Draupadi is disrobed at the Kaurava court and is shamed. She did not accept her fate meekly. She attacked the assembly in a bold language.

India is known for social inequalities and the caste system. These inequalities persist. However, lower caste groups are not absent from the Hindu tradition of debate. During the Bhakti movement (15th to 17th century), many saint-poets belonged to the lower castes. Kabir, Surdas and Ravidas in North India are good examples. Kabir was a weaver by caste, Ravidas a cobbler. South India is also noteworthy in this regard.

F. India Today

To sum up, ancient Indian polity was a monarchy, not a parliamentary democracy. However, the powers of the king were limited. There was division of power. Dharma was a powerful force. The *Rṣis* wielded influence and could upbraid royal authority. Women joined the debates and made important contributions. India was divided in many small and medium sized kingdoms. India has always been culturally pluralistic. The modern polity can learn from its history. India today follows the parliamentary system of government, borrowed from the British model. This system has not served India well. Note a few of the following drawbacks.

1. The parliamentary system in India has led to a multi-party system.
2. Each seat is contested by a dozen or more candidates. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections for example, 8,251 candidates fought for 543 Lok Sabha seats, or 15 per seat. One wins an election with mere 20-22 pct of the vote. Same is true for the 2019 elections.
3. In a multi-candidate contest, bloc-voting by a religious or language minority yields tremendous influence. Thus, in Bihar, West Bengal and Kerala, the Muslim block vote usually determines the winner. Hence, all candidates and parties pander to the Muslim vote.
4. Voting patterns in India are inverted from those in most other democracies. The higher the income and education, the lower the vote in India, just the reverse of the pattern in many other countries. For example, in the US, the better educated vote more than the less-well educated.
5. Further, surveys show that, on the average, Hindus vote at the lowest level—Sikhs vote 81%, Muslims 70%, Hindus 60%. Why Hindu voting rate is so dismal?
6. National and state level elections are not coordinated as to the timing. There is continually the election-generated fever in India. In a presidential system, state and national level elections are

coordinated on a single date, saving resources, minimizing conflict, and increasing leadership power.

A Presidential system on the American or the French model would be an improvement. A Presidential system would result in fewer elections, greater political stability, recruitment of talent to head government ministries, curtailing “breaking India forces,” empowering majority and generating law and order. The argument for a Presidential System for India is further presented in U-Tube talk with Aditi Banerjee at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg73oAhN9fw>.

References

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1970, p 263

² Nathan Katz, *Who are the Jews of India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 4.

³ Hari Prasad Shastri, Trans., *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, London: Shanti Sadan, 1952-59, Chapter 108, paraphrased here.

⁴ *Ibid.*, paraphrased. See also Sheldon Pollock, Trans., *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, MLBD, Delhi, 2004, “Ayodhyakand”, 27: 3, 5, 8, paraphrased.