# Understanding India as the Mother of Democracy

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**Abstract**

Since the days of colonialism, the debate on the nature of ancient political ideas, practices and order has been going on. The Western scholars failed to appreciate the ideological depth of ancient Indian political order and reduced it to as nothing but the reflection of religious order. It was widely held that the democracy and its institutions originated in the West, mainly in the ancient Greek. However, Indian scholars have mined a rich data and offered new interpretations to ancient political ideas and practices in India. Now India has come to claim that she is the 'mother of democracy'. If we take democracy as a set of ideals and practices, there are ample evidences that such practices were in vogue in ancient India. The ancient Indian ideals of collective decision-making, toleration, respect of diversity, faith in Ahimsa, harmonious blending between Individual and state through Dharma and other such values are the essence of democratic practice and way of life. In addition, now it is proved with ample evidence that this democratic culture was sustained and carried forward through various democratic practices and institutions like ancient republics and Buddhist Sanghas.

**Keywords:** Spirit of Democracy; Dignity of Individual; Peace and Non-Violence; Limitations on Political Power; Dharma; Collective Decision-Making; Diversity and Inclusiveness.
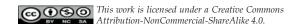
## INTRODUCTION

The debate on India's political past has emerged in new form in last few years. Now many commentators and the political establishment of India have come out with the assertion that India is the mother of democracy. So far students have been taught that the direct democracy originated in the ancient Greece. But now narrative is to unravel the roots of democratic traditions in ancient India to prove that the democratic tradition in India is older than the Greeks. During the his address to the UN General Assembly in September, 2021, Indian Prime Ministerclaimed India as the 'mother of democracy', countering the generally held perception that the Athenian city state, founded in Greece in the 6th century BCE, which gave the terms 'Demos' and 'Kratos' to mean people's rule, preceded it. He argued that in the Mahabharata, 'the first duty of citizens is described as choosing their own leader" and the *Vedas* dated much

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earlier, "speak of political power being exercised by broad based consultative bodies' (MEA: 2021). Also during the second edition of Summit for Democracy, hosted in March, 2023 by the US, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea and Zambia, Mr. Modi claimed that the *Mahabharata* and the *Vedas* and all historical references prove that non-hereditary rulers first existed in India, long before the rest of the world. Also there existed many republic states in ancient India where the rulers were not hereditary. India is, indeed, the mother of democracy'(Suhasini Ali: 2023). Indian establishment continued with this narrative during the G-20 Summit in September 2023, where a curated exhibition was organized to showcase India's democratic traditions by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. During this exhibition, India's claim as mother of democracy was articulated in the following words,"Democracy is an age-old concept in India. As per the Indian ethos, democracy comprises the values of freedom, acceptability, equality, and inclusivity in a society and allow its common citizens to lead a quality and dignified life. The Rig-Veda and the Atharvaveda, the earliest available sacred texts refer to participatory institutions like the Sabha, Samiti, and Sansad, the last term being still in currency denoting our parliament. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the great epics of this land, also talk about involving people in decision-making. There are also found in Indian textual instances that the authority to govern is earned through merit or common consensus and is not hereditary. There has been constant discourse on the legitimacy of the voter in various democratic institutions such as the Parishad and Samiti. The Indian democracy is truly a festive proclamation of veracity, cooperation, collaboration, peace, sympathy and collective strength of the people"(PIB: 2023). The same was reiterated during the P-20 Summit (Conference of Parliamentary bodies of G-20 countries) in October, 2023. During the Republic Day parade in 2024, the Ministry of Culture again organized its tableaux on the theme of India as the 'mother of democracy'. Thus, the narrative of India being the mother of democracy is persistently in the air for last few years.

## *Investigating India's Claims*

India's claim to be mother of democracy involves two fundamental questions:

**First,** What is Essence of Democracy?

**Second,** What is historicity of the elements of democracy in India's past?

### *A. Essence of Democracy*

The idea and practice of democracy has been analyzed primarily on the two bases: **First,** on the basis of field of operation/application like political democracy, social democracy, economic democracy and finally democracy as a way of life. **Second,** on the basis of practice of democracy, we have two forms-direct democracy and indirect or representative democracy. While direct democracy is said to have been in practice in Greek city states, the representative democracy is further divided into Parliamentary and Presidential forms of democracy. The entire debate on democracy in the west centre don the ideal form of representative democracy. In modern representative democracies, the features of ideal democracy, to the extent that they exist, are realized through a variety of political institutions and mechanisms like free and fair elections, freedom to form associations and interest groups, independent sources of information and freedom of expression. These institutions, which are broadly similar in different countries despite significant differences in constitutional structure, were entirely new in human history at the time of their first appearance in Europe and the United States in the 18th century (Dahl, Robert A, David Froomkin and Ian Shapiro: Retrieved 2024).

In brief, the democratic discourse in the west mainly focused on institutional form of democracy and its variants in different fields. And claim was made that since these institutional forms originated in the west, they were the first to invent and practice democracy. Even the ongoing debate on democracy around the ideas of 'Deliberative Democracy' or 'Participatory Democracy' or 'Consultative Democracy' or 'Discursive Democracy' (John Rawls, Jurgen Habermas, C. B Macpherson, Joseph M Bessette, David Held, Joshua Cohen, Dannis Thompson, John Elster, James Fishkin, Carole Pateman and others)  focuses on strengthening the tools of deliberation and participation like citizen assemblies, deliberative opinion polls, public consultative surveys, e-democracy, liquid democracy, participatory budgeting, town meeting and referendums.

Joseph M Bessettecoined the term deliberative democracy in 1980; which essentially means thatin democracy, the political decisions should be the product of fair and reasonable discussion and debate among citizens. Carole Pateman (2012), a staunch and contemporary supporter of participatory democracy argued that it will provideopportunities for individuals to participate in decision making in their everyday lives as well as in the wider political

system. It is about democratizing democracy. In brief the contemporary debate in the west about democracy focuses on representation, majority principle, participation of people in political process to realize their interests and devising suitable institutions and mechanism to realize such participation and deliberation.

However, above focus on institutions and participation is at best the formal structure of democracy. It is in this sense that UK or the US has been projected as the first to practice democracy in modern times. However, it cannot be equated with the 'essence' of democracy. In fact, the essence of democracy lied in 'democratic culture', which among other thing is characterized by dignity of individual rather than fulfillment of self interest, treating individual as end rather than means, maintaining autonomy of social space from political domain, peaceful resolution of conflict, inclusivity and equality, freedom of individual to pursue their non-political ends, and placing viable limitation on political power in tune with above ideals. This democratic culture is the prerequisite of democracy, irrespective of forms of democracy or tools of representation and participation. It is this broad definition of democracy in terms of democratic culture that India excelled and can claim that it is the mother of democracy as these ideas and values have been in existence in India's 5000 year civilization. However, this is not to deny that democratic and republican institutions were absent in India in ancient times. Traces of democratic practices are well located since the Vedic period in India.

*B. the Historicity of Democratic Essence (Democratic Culture) in India*

The ongoing debate on India being the mother of democracy for last few years is not new. The earlier debate about India's past political credentials started as a reaction to European colonialism in 18th century, which rested on the premise that the West is the cradle of democracy and the Oriental is the abode of despotism. The idea was invoked to justify British colonialism in India. Many Western scholars such as Charles Grant, James Mill, JS Mill, Macaulay, Rudyard Kipling propagated the idea that the western rule in India is boon to civilize the despotic and backward people of India. This is the underlying spirit of Rudyard Kipling's 1899 idea of 'White man's Burden'. Grant in his book, '*Observations*' published in 1797 'painted a dark picture of the moral depravity of the people of India and attributed this to the uniformly despotic governments that shaped their morals. That despotism, however,

Grant argued, resulted from the intrinsic character of their religion, which was the invention of a crafty and imperious priesthood' (Guha: 2023). Though some Western scholars of this era, like William Jones and Thomas Munro held a sympathetic attitude towards ancient Indian public institutions, yet the majority of the Western thinkers, British policy makers and administrators held the stereotype view of equating entire Oriental world including India with despotism and backwardness.Many Indian scholars during colonialism as well as immediately after independence effectively countered this western narrative with new research and facts. Some of these researches about India's political past are:R C Majumdar (*Corporate Life in Ancient India*, 1919), K P Jaiswal (*Hindu Polity*, 1918, 1936), B. K Sarakar (*The Political Institutions and Theories of Hindus*, 1922), N. C Bandyopadhyaya (*Development of Hindu Polity and Political Theories*, 1927) A S Altekar (*State and Government in Ancient India*, 1949), UN Ghoshal (*A History of Indian Political Ideas*, 1959).

Yet the approach of Indian scholars during the early debate was largely defensive in nature as it countered the biased view of western scholars about ancient political ideas and practices. The present debate on India being the mother of democracy is more assertive, focused, and supported by research and archeological finding in last 100 years. The debate gets more visibility n view of India's status as emerging economic power and projection of India's soft powers in recent years. It was in 2007 that the UN General Assembly declared 02 October, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi as the International Non-Violence Day. Non-violence is the essential element of democratic culture. Later, recognizing India's past cultural attainment, the UN general Assembly in 2014 declared 21 June as International Yoga Day. In addition, India is not only the largest functioning democracy, but it has spotless track record of democratic transfer of power many times since her independence. Thus, India enjoys the benefit of favourableeconomic, cultural and political environment to assert its claim as the mother of democracy. The recent debate on this point should be viewed in this perspective. Yet we need to summon historical facts and record to buttress India's claim as mother of democracy as well as sustainer of democratic culture for five Millennia.

The Elements of Democratic Culture and practice in Ancient India

Some of the fundamental elements of democratic culture have been ingrained in Indian way of life since time immemorial:

**1. Dignity of Individual:** The ancient Indian political tradition did not treat individual as the tool of political order. Instead it was an end in itself. Indian philosophical tradition of *Advaitvad* postulated that each individual as well as all living being imbibe the same elements of universal spirit which underlines this universe. Each individualis free to seek his spiritual goals and salvation in his own manner. On the basis of his exhaustive study of ancient Indian political ideas and institutions, N.C. Bandyopadhyaya: (1927; 325) remarks, "the crude political discipline never came to be regarded as the summumbonum of existence. Man was not means as in the speculation of Europe, but as he was the highest end in himself. It was for his self-realization that the state was conceived as a means to that higher end. The state and its discipline extended over whole of man's economic or material activity, but, beyond that, the self discipline individual was left to himself to work for his own salvation. Religion or intellectual advancement never came within the scope of political discipline". He also lists some political rights of individuals in ancient India: also lists some popular rights in ancient India- the right to exist, the right to hold and maintain family, right to own lawfully earned property and the right to look after his own material and spiritual self realization. There was also moral right to remove a tyrannical king. Thus, individual as embodiment of sacred spirit, his freedom for spiritual salvation and provision of certain basic rights essential for his growth as human being attest the point that Individual enjoyed full dignity and was treated as an end itself. This idea is the base of any democratic culture.

**2. Broader conception of individual, society and world:** While western scholars treat democratic process as arena for reconciling individual interests, Indian tradition takes a broader perspective of individual interests and pleads for inclusive political arrangement. Maha Upnishad, sacred text of 8th century BC thus proclaims, '*Ayambandhurayam Neti Ganana Laghuchetasam, Udaracharitanam Tu Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*', meaning this is my relative and that is not is the consideration of people with narrow mind. For those who have liberal and broad outlook, this world is one family (Hattangadi: 2000, Singh: 2008). The idea is relevant today not only for the promotion of democracy at global level but also for inclusive development and promoting a spirit of tolerance (Gupta: 2020). This idea is not only the main theme of G-20 Summit hosted by India in September, 2023, but also rightly ingrained at the entrance of Indian Parliament. It embodies the two elements of a democratic culture toleration and inclusiveness. Another ideal of ancient India evokes the same inclusiveness. Taken from Garud Puran, this Sanskrit phrase reads as '*sarvebhavant usukhinaḥsarvesantunirāmayāḥ; sarvebhadrāṇipaśyan tumākaścidduḥkhabhāgbhavet*', meaning may all be happy; May all be free from infirmities; May all see good; May none partake suffering (Mishra: 2020).

**3. Emphasis on Non-violence and Peace:** Non-violence and peace are the essential part of the democratic culture as democratic process rests on peaceful resolution of differences and issues. In all Indian cultural traditions like Hindu, Buddha, and Jain, the value of non-violence and peace has been emphasized in all spheres of life. The verse '*Ahimsa parmo dharma*', from Mahabharat pleads that the non-violence is the supreme duty. Buddhism and Jainism prescribed non-violence in though and action as essential principle of human conduct. In fact, if we glance back to Indian history, the toleration and emphasis on peaceful means was day to day experience of Indian civilization. Hindu scriptures Buddhism and Jainism all provide for **'Ahimsa'** and peaceful means.It was this principle which was used by Mahatma Gandhi as political weapon for liberation of India from British rule. Today Indian civilization has been recognized as cradle of peace and non-violence.

**4. Autonomy of Society from State:** In western though, many thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Mussolini and other idealist thinker either equated state with society or subsumed society under the jurisdiction of state. But in India, the social and cultural sphere has always been autonomous of political order. They were both regulated by the ruled based order under the rubric or Dharma, which provided a distinct jurisdiction and duty to each. It was because of this fact that Indian society and culture survived many foreign aggression and rule for many centuries. While state was captured by foreign power, society kept on moving on its own path without facing much disruption. It is the clue to the long survival of Indian culture and civilization. The limited domain of political order allowed Indians to pursue their social and cultural goals and practices.

**5. Limitations on Political Power:** No doubt, Indian scholars interpreted political order in terms of monarchical rule but they were aware of the misuse of political power. The limitation on political power is essential feature of democratic culture and constitutionalism. In India, the idea of Dharma laid down the foundation of social constitutionalism. Dharma is not a translation of English world religion which stands for a religious practice. Dharma has

been used in Indian civilization as moral duty and rule based order. Thus, king will have its own Dharma to seek the welfare of people. All ancient scholars like Kautilya, Manu, Shukrachar, Ved Vyas, Kamndak, Yagyvalkya supported the idea of *Rajydharama* or the duty of the kings or rulers. The Rajyadharma of the king was to seek security and welfare of citizens or Praja. Kautilyasupports Monarchy but links the fate of the king with the welfare of people. This was potential limitation on the powers of king. In fact, ancient Indian scholars devised a Dharma or duty based political order, which rested on the presumption that if each element of society fulfils its duty, there would be no occasion for demand of separate political rights. This political order is in stark contrast to the western notion of right based political order. Thus, Dharma was also Indian version of rule of law and everyone-ruler and ruled were subject to it. Ancient Indian worldview took individual and state as complementary to each other as both were bound by the law of **Dharma** (essential duty). The western political thought is based on the assumption that individual and state are in conflict with each other; hence individual should be protected by the provision of certain legal rights. Thus, the concept of Dharma is the unique contribution of Indians to a harmonious and democratic political order. Unfortunately, the western scholars translated Dharma as religion and distorted its meaning. However, Gandhi tried to revive the notion of Dharma in its original sense when he commented that politics without Dharma is like snake in the neck. This is what he means by Dharma, when he talks about politics to be based on dharma or moral duty.

Besides, dharma, there were other political mechanisms to ensure that king does not become authoritarian rulers. NC Bandyopadhyaya (1927, 325) list the following four such mechanisms:

1. The king was equally subject to law and was not a law maker.

2. The king has no right for arbitrary taxation.

3. Justice was ensured by existence of assessors in law suits. The king merely announced the sentence.

4. In small democratic states, there was always a strong public opinion and men of all castes have their laws recognized.

5. Democratic Institutions and Practices in Ancient India:

With new discoveries and research it is now well established that democratic institutions too existed in India much before the West took to such institutions in ancient Greece. Thus, we have the provision of ancient democratic institutions like *Sabha, Samiti and Vidatha* mentioned in ancient text of Rig Veda around 1500 BC. In this text while Sabha and Samiti find mention 8 and 9 times respectively, *Vidatha* is mentioned 122 times. Sabha, consisting of heads of families or clans was an advisory body for the King and limiting his authority. *Samiti* was a larger body like assembly of all people. According to Jayaswal (1943, Third edition), the *Samiti* the national assembly of the whole people or '*Visha*' and that its function was to elect or reelect the *Rajan*or the King. It was the duty of the king to attend its meetings. While *Sabha and Samiti* functioned as a check on the arbitrary powers of the King, Vidatha was a larger assembly for many other public functions of economic, religious and cultural nature. RS Sharma (1959) has noted that women also took part in the meetings of Vidatha. In this connection, no less significant was the institution of Coronation Ceremony of the King as mentioned in the *Aitreya* and *SatapathaBrahmanas*. This exercised a sort of popular control over King as he has to take oath that he should be deprived of all good if he injures the people.

In post Vedic period when society became more settled, we witness the existence of 16 *Mahajanpadas* in 6th century BC. These *Mahajanpadas* followed the republican form of government. Many of them like *Vajji Sangha* in Bihar did not have any king and relied more on deliberation and collective decision making in assemblies. None of the republics *(Ganas)* in ancient India developed aggressive tendencies as was seen in ancient Greece. Even with collective decision making, Republics in ancient India attained high degree of efficiency in administration. That is why Indian republics have longer existence till the beginning of Christian era. They are symbol of democratic states in ancient India (Suda: 1986).

The political ideas contained in Buddhist literature and practices at Buddhist Sanghas further attest the existence of democratic norms and practices in ancient India. Buddhist text **Aghanna Sutta** mentions democratic election of *Mahasammat* (King). As per this text the institution of Mahasammat was secular in nature and based on the consent of people. It was established for the protection and welfare of people**.** According to Bandyopadhyaya (1927, 149-150), the democratic character of Buddhist order is further illustrated from Mahavagga and Culavagga texts' which mention the following provisions of democratic practice:

1. The Buddhist Sangha has a body of rules regarding the formed of resolution moved in the assembly.

2. There was a rule of quorum.

3. In cases of difference of opinion the sense of assembly was decided by the vote of majority. Voting by ballots was known.

4. Complicated matters were referred to the committees.

5. Definite rules existed regarding the votes of absentees.

The democratic institutions continued to survive in India in Medieval India in at least at the local level even under the foreign rule. Now we have the evidence of pulsating local self government during the Chola rule in 10-11 century South India. The evidence has come from the *Uttaramerur* inscriptions located in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. These inscriptions give detailsof how members of local bodies were selected, the required qualifications, their roles and responsibilities, and even the circumstances in which they could be removed. Altekar(1949, 229) strongly supports the view that local government institutions in ancient India were autonomous and democratic in their functioning. He finds popular elements in the functioning of village councils since ancient times. According to him, 'Jatakas inform us that neither village headman nor village accountant ruled over the village community as per their sweet will. They were both of them guided by the opinion of village public, which made itself felt through the village elders, who formed type of informal council since early times'. Thus autonomous and democratic functioning of local government has been norm in ancient India. Altekar also claims that republican form of government was not monarchy but collective form of government. However, after the independence of India, the debate on the nature of ancient India polity remained largely confined to academic institutions.

We have reference of '*Anubhav Mantapa*' established by famous Saint Basava in 12th Century in Bidar district of Karnataka. It was the first religious and social assembly of the world to discuss, share and deliberate on various philosophical, religious and social issues. While Inaugurating the new Parliament building in May, 2023, Indian Prime Minister Modi referred to *Anubhava Mantapa* as the symbol of parliamentary democracy. Even in modern time, India has a sort of record among newly independent countries to exercise peaceful transfer of power through ballot 17 times in last 75 years, whereas many countries have succumbed to authoritarian regimes during this period. This is no mean achievement. This is not merely an outcome of political arrangement, but the outcome of India's democratic values and tradition deeply rooted in Indian psyche since ancient time. This gives rise to debate on democracy as a way of life.

## CONCLUSION

It has been along held view that the west is the mother of democracy and all other modern values. This view was even promoted to justify the unethical and illegal colonial rule of centuries. Now India has come to claim that India not the West is the mother of democracy. India's claim is more sustainable when we adopt a broader meaning of democracy. Democracy is not a form of government, but a way of life, sustained by a democratic culture. Essentially it has strong philosophical foundation which is displayed in the form of democratic culture. The claim of India's being the mother of democracy is more sound and credible if we consider the development of democratic culture and traditions in India since ancient times, which are essential component of a democratic culture. When we talk of democratic cultureor democracy as a way of life it entails host of values and beliefs like spirit of toleration, faith in peaceful means for change, respecting diversity of views and traditions, dignity of individual and harmonious balance between citizens and polity. In brief, the ancient Indian ideals of collective decision-making, toleration, respect of diversity, faith in *Ahimsa*, harmonious blending between Individual and state through Dharma and other such values are the essence of democratic practice and way of life. In addition, now it is proved with ample evidence that this democratic culture was sustained and carried forward through various democratic practices and institutions also. For thousands of years, ancient scholars and people evolved and perfected this democratic culture. This democratic has remarkable continuity since ancient times to the modern era. The antiquity of this democratic culture made India not only a successful example of democracy but also the mother of democracy.

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