



Republics in Ancient India

Why in News

Recently, while addressing the [United Nations General Assembly](#), the Prime Minister made an important historical point that **India is not just the world's largest democracy, but also the Mother of Democracy.**

- There is evidence of the existence of **proto forms of democracy and republicanism** in ancient India.

Key Points

- **Vedic Governance:** The Vedas describe at least **two forms of republican governance:**
 - **Monarchy:** The first would consist of elected kings. This has always been seen as an early form of democracy.
 - **Republics:** The second form is that of rule without a monarch, with power vested in a council or sabha.
 - The membership of such sabhas was not always determined by birth, but they often **comprised people who had distinguished themselves by their actions.**
 - There is even a hint of the **modern bicameral system of legislatures**, with the **sabha** often sharing power with the **samiti**, which was made up of **common people.**
 - The **vidhaata**, or the assembly of people for debating policy, military matters and important issues impacting all, has been mentioned more than a hundred times in the **Rig Veda**. Both **women and men** took part in these deliberations.
- **Mahabharata:**
 - In Chapter 107/108 of Mahabharata's **Shanti Parva**, there is a **detailed narration** about the features of **republics (called ganas) in India.**
 - It states that when there is **unity among the people** of a republic that **republic becomes powerful** and its people become prosperous and they are **destroyed only by internal conflicts** between the people.
 - It shows that in ancient India there were not only kingdoms (like Hastinapur and Indraprastha) but also **regions where there was no king but a republic.**
- **Buddhist Canons:**
 - The **Buddhist** Canon, both in **Sanskrit** (in which much of Mahayana Buddhist literature was written) and in **Pali** (in which much of Hinayana literature was written) has extensive reference to republics in India, e.g. the **Lichchavi city of Vaishali.**
 - It also describes in detail Vaishali's rivalry with neighbouring Magadha, which was a monarchy. Had the Lichchavis won, the trajectory of governance may well have been non-monarchical in the Subcontinent.
 - **The Mahanibbana Sutta** (Pali Buddhist work) and the **Avadaana Shatak** (a Sanskrit

- Buddhist text of the second century A.D) also mention that certain areas were under a republican form of government.
- Buddhist and Jain texts list **16 powerful states or mahajanapadas of the time.**

▪ **Greek Records:**

- The **Greek historian Diodorus Siculus** writes that at the time of Alexander's invasion (in 326 B.C.), most cities in **North West India had democratic forms of government** (though some areas were under kings, e.g. Ambhi and Porus) and this is **also mentioned by the historian Arian.**

- Alexander's army faced its fiercest resistance from the armies of these republics, e.g. the **Mallas**, and gained victory only after suffering huge casualties.

▪ **Kautilya's Arthashastra:**

- Other sources appear in the **Ashtadhyayi of Panini, the Arthashastra of Kautilya**, etc.
- **Elements of State by Kautilya:** Any state is thought of as composed of seven elements. The first three are swami or the king, amatya or the ministers (administration) and janapada or the people.
 - The king must function on the advice of the amatyas for the good of the people.
 - The ministers are appointed from amongst the people (the Arthashastra also **mentions entrance tests**).
 - As per the Arthashastra, in the **happiness and benefit of his people lies the happiness and benefit of the King.**

[Source: IE](#)

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