

# Shades of Indian Democracy

India's Democratic Tapestry

An Initiative By  
Delivering Democracy Working Group



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India Coordinator under G20-C20



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Delivering Democracy Working Group

India is the mother of democracy.  
Let us together understand its  
legacy.

Let us revisit our rich history,  
understand our heritage and enrich  
ourselves & the world.



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Democracy has played an essential role in the development of civilizations and helped transform the world's power structures into peaceful coexistence. It is crucial to revisit the past and gain insights into democracy through different ages for a better understanding and implementation in the current stage.

Shades of Indian Democracy is an initiative by the C20 Working Group Delivering Democracy to bring up the concept of democracy through different eras of Indian history.

Shades of Indian Democracy is an effort through which the context of democracy throughout different ages will be studied and documented. This research aims to shed light on the shades of democracy throughout Indian history and how it helped shape the country's development. This also provides a platform to showcase the narratives of different methodologies used in the past to deliver democracy.



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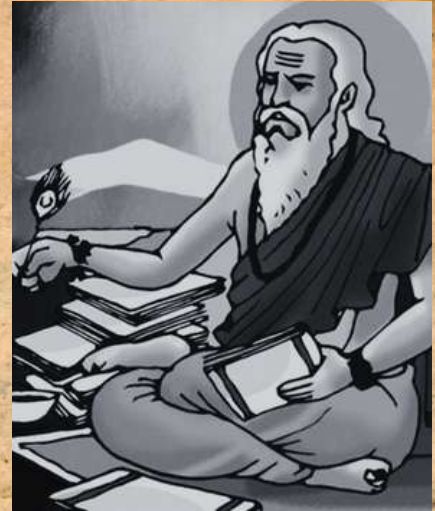
# Tracing Democratic Elements Across History

- Vedas & Smritis
- Ramayana
- Mahabharata
- Uthiramerur
- Arthashastra
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- Anubhava Mantapa
- Manusmriti
- Mallas
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- Mauryan Empire
- Chola Dynasty
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## Vedas & Smritis: Democratic Elements

The Vedas, Hinduism's earliest scriptures, were written in ancient India between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE. They contain references to democratic systems popular in the 1500 BCE to 500 BCE e.g Sabha & Samiti, forms of assemblies important in ancient India's governance.



The Rajasuya and Ashvamedha Yajna rituals by the king were other democratic practices. Connotations like Prajapathi or 'people's leader' also show democratic elements.

Members of the Parishad/ Council were allowed to vote on resolution (Pratijna). Rigvedic hymns directed to Samjnana urged people to join in their assembly, speak in one voice, in a union of thoughts, hearts, policies, hopes and desires.

Certain democratic elements curtailed the absolute power of the king in the early Aryans period. The Rig Veda promoted the equality of all animals, and all subsequent religious literature was based on this fundamental principle.

The Atharva Veda gives Sabha special significance (ahimsita parair anabhibhavya) meaning the voice of majority not to be overruled.



# Ramayana's Retrospective Analysis

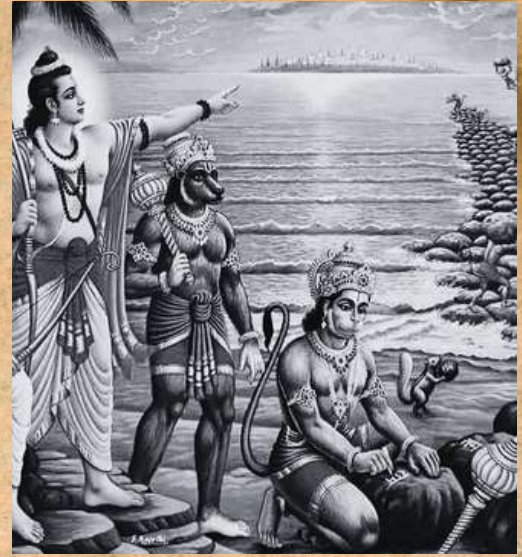
The Ramayana is an epic that has been revered in Indian culture for centuries. While it is primarily a religious text, it also contains important messages about governance, justice, and democracy. The Ramayana portrays a society where democratic values such as consultation, equality, and consent of the governed were valued and practiced.

Rama's exile, despite being a King, shows equality before law. Throughout his journey of exile, he remains committed to justice & democratic values. He consults with his advisors, respects the opinions of the people, and upholds the rule of law. His wife Sita chooses to accompany him on free will, showing women empowerment. Sita is portrayed as a powerful and independent woman who stands up for herself and fights for what she believes in.



In Sundara Kanda, Hanuman observes a group of monkeys using democratic process to take a decision on crossing the ocean to reach Lanka.

Even primary antagonist Ravana's brother Vibhishana was known for his virtuous character and loyalty to dharma (righteousness).



It is worth noting that the concept of democracy as we know it today may not have existed in ancient India during the time of Ramayana. However, there were elements of democratic decision-making in the form of councils of ministers and advisors who would help the king in making important decisions.

Overall, Ramayana teaches us valuable life lessons that are relevant even today. It inspires us to be righteous, humble, and compassionate towards others. It contains numerous examples of democratic procedures that were prevalent in ancient Indian society.

Dharma is the moral code of conduct in Hinduism, and Ramayana emphasizes the importance of following it in all aspects of life. Its emphasis on consultation and participatory governance, equality before the law, women's empowerment, and consent of the governed is an important contribution to democratic principles.



# Mahabharata: Studying a Monarchy under the Democratic Lens

The Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic, believed to be composed between 400 BCE to 400 CE, contains a wealth of information on the duties of government and the king or ruler.

While the Mahabharata is not explicitly about democracy, there are some elements of the epic that can be seen as relevant to democratic governance.

One of the most significant aspects of democracy is the idea of popular sovereignty, or the notion that political power ultimately rests with the people. E.g story of King Shibi sacrificing his own flesh to save life of a dove.



The Mahabharata highlights the importance of the consent of the governed in the exercise of political power. For instance, King Janaka, who was known for his wisdom and fairness, was respected and loved by his people because he always made decisions that were in their best interests.



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Another aspect of democracy is the idea of representation, with several instances of characters choosing their representatives e.g Pandavas selected Yudhishtira as their King.

Yet another example is the use of council of advisors by Pandavas. This is similar to the way that democratic governments often have a cabinet of advisors who help the elected officials make decisions. There are also instances of idea of balance of power existing, e.g Yudhishtira is to share his power with his brother to maintain their support.



Mahabharata portrays the concept of equality before law. When King Parikshit was cursed to die by a sage, he accepted his fate & didn't use his power to escape the consequence of his actions. Women empowerment is showcased through active role played by Draupadi, the wife of Pandavas, in the decision-making process. Additionally, Shikhandi, a transgender warrior, highlights the importance of inclusivity and acceptance in society.

In conclusion, while the Mahabharata may not be a purely democratic text, yet it does contain instances of democratic principles and values.

## Tracing our roots to Uthiramerur

Uthiramerur is a Panchayat town in Tamil Nadu's Kancheepuram district, around 90 kilometers from Chennai.

Inscriptions from the reigns of Raja Raja Chola (985–1014 AD), his son Rajendra Chola, and Krishnadeveraya can be seen on three main temples at Uthiramerur.

These inscriptions describe the code of conduct for holding local body elections.

They reveal that for the ease of administration, the settlement was split into 30 wards and governed by a local village assembly.

The assembly in turn was constituted into committees for monitoring the water bodies, agricultural land, gold trade, etc. which were overlooked by an annual committee.

The eligibility of contestants and selection process is defined elaborately. The inscription also refers to a fair & transparent election process. Constitution-like framework also existed with provisions to remove a person from office if they failed to perform their duty.

Uthiramerur is also known as the birthplace of democracy. Any discussion on Indian democracy and elections is incomplete without its mention.



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# Kautilya's Arthashastra: Ancient Blueprint of Governance

Written in 300 BCE, Arthashastra, widely regarded as the magnum opus of Kautilya, deals with subjects of statecraft, politics, strategies, military affairs & foreign policy.

It favoured absolutist monarchy but also advocated King's responsibility towards ensuring peace, justice & responsibility. It contains 15 books, 150 chapters, 180 sections and 6000 slokas.



Arthashastra focuses on the King as a sovereign and his responsibilities, which are quite similar to the contemporary democratic systems. He is bestowed with extensive powers which should be used for the welfare of the people.

There is also focus on matters of governance & administration. A single centre of power was expected to increase responsibility & efficiency. A well-run stable state was believed to adjust to challenges & absorb shocks.

Personnel administration has been vividly described in Arthashastra and all importance appointments were made by King himself.



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Features of modern day personnel administration are observed in the treatise & it talks about merit-based recruitment and training for various governmental departments. Effective law enforcement, upkeep of law & order and well-established legal system based on rule of law are mentioned.

Bureaucratic accountability is also discussed as a means to prevent corruption. Preventive & punitive measures are mentioned to punish corrupt governments.

Arthashastra also mentions the provision for financial relief to a government servant after his death. It emphasizes responsiveness, accountable and responsible government. The government is bound to respect basic human values and rights.

Though written thousands of years ago, Arthashastra holds a pivotal position in governing a state in a democracy, it is a manual for solving the practical issues faced in a democracy.



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# Jainism: Democratic Elements

The Jain literature is said to be older than the doctrine of Buddhism, with its origin traced back to 900 BCE. It was promoted in the South India when Chandragupta Maurya (322-298 BC) adopted Jainism, became a monk, and went to Karnataka. Jainism speaks about the democratic elements through its concepts of Samata ('Samaye Samano Hoi'), the Jaina term for equality and individualism.



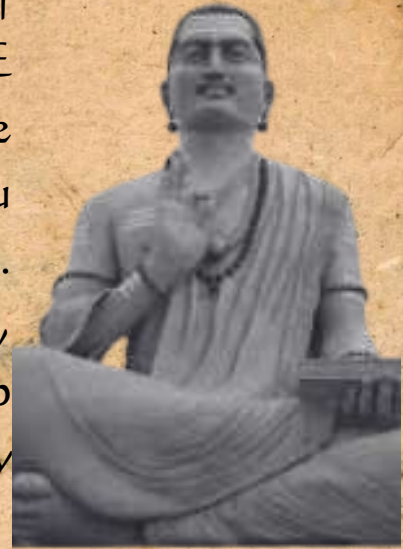
The significant contribution of Vardhaman Mahavir towards Jainism was the notion of Anekantavada- meaning accepting & appreciating the views of others. Another associated concept is 'Adhagajanyayah' – the axiom of the blind men and the elephant, which teaches that everyone interprets truth from their own perspective, an importance democratic principle. Jainism is also known for its practice of Ahimsa (Non-violence).

Some of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution such as Equality before Law, Right to Freedom of Speech & also the Directive Principles of the State Policy underlining the principles of tolerance, environment protection, and social justice resembles the teachings of Jainism.



## Anubhava Mantapa & Democratic Elements

Anubhava Mantapa, known as the "hall of spiritual experience," was a 12th-century CE socio-religious organisation built in the Indian state of Karnataka by the Hindu philosopher and social reformer Basavanna. It was a key figure in the Bhakti movement, attempting to democratise God's worship while challenging the Brahmanical monopoly on religious knowledge and customs.



This institution was accessible to everybody, regardless of caste, creed, gender, or socioeconomic status. It was democratic in nature, with the belief that every individual is intellectual and capable of thinking about societal issues. It promoted use of vernacular language & democratic decision-making. Individuals were permitted to raise any questions & concerns. Some of the principles accepted were: equality of all, universal brotherhood, freedom to choose profession, etc.

It is also considered as the 'first democratic parliament idea', with the only difference being that the members weren't elected, however, they had freedom to express themselves.

Anubhava Mantapa was a one-of-a-kind institution built with the intention of transforming the state into an egalitarian state.



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## Manusmriti: A Pragmatic Approach towards Democracy

As declared by the Vedic texts, Manu is the father of the human race and the first lawgiver (Brown, 1985, 27). Though he was appointed as the King by himself, he accepted kingship only when requested by people, showing democratic character of state.



Manusmriti is made up of 2685 verses that deal with every aspect of human life & is believed to be composed much before Yajnavalkya Smriti (Bhagwan, 1999, 5). It showcases Manu's idea of welfare state created with 3 elements- physical, political, and spiritual, and 3 branches of government placed under the political elements of the state.

Manu explicitly mentioned the right of individuals to enjoy sovereignty to its zenith as the spiritual element, reflecting the principle of Utilitarianism. Manu was the first one to discuss the notion of individual sovereignty albeit the Western philosophies talked about individual liberty (Subbarao, 2005, 491).

The promotion of individual interests was also central to his idea of the welfare state. He insisted on universal employment while underling the Varnashrama system of the Vedas.

The King was responsible for protecting people and was expected to function through 7-8 ministers.



Any decision taken regarding the kingdom should be done in discussion with the ministers, whose criteria of appointment was also mentioned. Three types of laws were tabled to avoid the exploitation of the deprived or vulnerable by the privileged, namely- Kula dharma, Jati dharma, Desa dharma; according to which, people were grouped to elect their representatives. Furthermore, Manusmriti proposed the appointment of a superintendent for each town by the king.

The Vedas were to serve as a guide for law-making. The king, the cabinet, and the civil service together formed the executive. The guilty must be punished as per the degree of the offense.

From the perspective of Manusmriti, India or Bharat is considered a single entity and a sacred territory by the people living there (Umashankar, 2022, 535). The Divine Theory of the Origin of the State is often reflected by Manusmriti but it is not the theory of the Divine Rights of the King.

Amidst all of the criticisms, Manu's contributions towards the republican monarchy as well as democracy are worth shedding light on. Manu's pragmatic approach is evident through his concepts of the creation of the state, individual sovereignty, fundamental rights of the people, etc. These concepts juxtapose the thoughts of Western philosophers and political thinkers.



## Republics of Mallas

The Mahajanapada period saw the emergence of several republics, including the Mallas. The Mallas were known for their republican form of government, which was based on the principle of self-governance. The members called themselves rojas, & they had an assembly hall called Santhagara, where they gathered to discuss matters of governance.



The assembly would elect a leader, who would hold the title of Raja. However, the Raja did not have absolute power, and his decisions were subject to approval by the assembly. The members of the assembly were elected by the people, and anyone could participate in the assembly, regardless of their social status. This was a significant departure from the Vedic period, where the social hierarchy was strictly defined, and only members of the upper castes could participate in governance.

They had a tradition of public debate and discourse, which allowed people to express their views and hold their leaders accountable.

Overall, they played an important role in shaping the political landscape of the time and contributed to the development of democratic ideas and principles that continue to influence modern India.



## Democracy: From Lichhavis to Vaishali

Vaishali was an ancient city in present-day Bihar, India, which was closely associated with the Lichchhavi kingdom, an influential political entity in ancient India. The Lichchhavis, who were described as Kshatriyas, were known for their democratic governance and support of non-Brahmanical religions such as Jainism and Buddhism.



The Lichchhavis' republic, which was established in Vaishali, was a significant departure from the traditional monarchical system prevalent in ancient India. It gave citizens a voice in governance and decision-making and promoted the idea of collective decision-making through a democratic process. Republics evolved from monarchs and were the forerunners of democracies.

The Licchavis established their Republic in order to consolidate political control. Cetaka, the enlightened and valiant king of Videha, is credited with founding it. He was also the President of the Republic as a whole. This Republic was made up of nine Licchavis and nine Mallas governmental entities.

Each entity had an administrative head who was responsible for maintaining law and order and ensuring the efficient functioning of the entity. The republic as a whole had a system of taxation, which was used to fund public works and infrastructure projects.



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The Licchhavi kingdom, ruled by a council of elected representatives called the "Gana" or "Sangha, is often cited as an early example of democratic administration in South Asia. The council met regularly in a designated assembly hall, known as the "Sabhagara" to discuss matters such as taxation, lawmaking, and the appointment of officials.

The Licchhavi kingdom also had a system of checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power, e.g separate councils responsible for overseeing the actions of the king and the council.

The Licchhavi kingdom gave citizens a voice in governance and decision-making and promoted the idea of collective decision-making through a democratic process. It was a successful model of governance, and its principles were adopted by other kingdoms and empires that emerged in the Indian subcontinent.

The establishment of democracies in modern-day India is a testament to the Licchhavis' enduring legacy and the influence of their democratic ideals.

Overall, the Licchhavis played a crucial role in the development of democracy in ancient India and their contributions to Indian history and culture are significant.



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## Mauryan Empire & Democracy

The Mauryan Empire, which lasted in ancient India from 322 BCE to 185 BCE, is widely regarded as one of India's finest empires. While it was an autocratic empire with a centralised authority structure, the Mauryan government included democratic features.



The Ashokan inscriptions provide insight into the vast Mauryan administration, inspired by the Arthashastra. The empire was divided into four provinces & saw all aspects of governance at all levels, from local sanitation to international trade, using this complex system of bureaucracy. Emperor Ashoka, who ruled the Mauryan Empire from 268 BCE to 232 BCE, promoted a moral and ethical philosophy called Dhamma, which emphasized the principles of non-violence, religious tolerance, and social welfare.

Farmers were relieved from provincial kings' tax and harvest collecting obligations because of the Mauryan Empire's disciplined central control. Although income collection was regimental, the Mauryan Empire supported various public works projects to boost production.

The Mauryan Empire was famous for its centralised government system, with monarch advised by a council of ministers known as the 'Mantriparishad'.



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Tirthas were the administration's highest level of officials. Under the administration's control, all births, deaths, industries, foreigners, trade, sale of products, manufactured items, and sales tax were recorded. The Mauryas not only constructed a massive empire that encompassed almost the entire subcontinent and extended beyond it in the north-west, but they also integrated it by instituting a suitable administrative system.

In general, the Mauryan state was a monarchy with a powerful king at its centre. Mauryan kings were supervised by the Council of Ministers and followed the Arthashastra's guidance. The state also maintained a massive, efficient, and well-equipped army.

The Mauryan empire was initially depicted as a new kind of administration characterised by centralised authority and planning. However, after evaluating many data, it is concluded to be encompassing multiple types of economy, politics, and lifestyles.

It would be difficult for the Mauryan state to enforce equal central control over the huge realm. We can't dispute the Mauryan administration's centrifugal tendencies. However, this does not imply that the Mauryan administration was uniformed or devoid of a variety of local components. It truly laid the foundation of modern democratic principles in its own unique way.



# Chola Dynasty & Democracy

The Chola dynasty was one of the longest-ruling dynasties in the history of Southern India. Their rule between the 9th and 13th century is regarded as one of the formative periods of Tamil culture. The Chola bureaucracy was highly organized.



A careful balance between central control and local independence was maintained and non-interference in local government was sacrosanct. The uniqueness of the administration of Cholas lies in its autonomy and self-sufficiency in the field of village administration, with remarkable autonomy at the village level.

There were three assemblies called the Ur, Sabha or Mahasabha and Nagaram; divided based upon democratic principles. Official activities were executed through Sabhas (Meetings) whose were elected from the people.

Another aspect of Chola governance that reflected a degree of participatory decision-making was the practice of consulting with experts and specialists on matters related to administration, economics, and law.

There is no doubt that the Chola government was one of the most inventive and evolved empires of ancient India.

There were several favorable rules and regulations that the administration adopted that reflected democratic characteristics.



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## Democracy in Buddhist Era

There were various governments that were seen as democratic during the Buddha's time, including the Shakyas, Koliyas, and Mallas, in addition to large kingdoms like Kosala and Magadha. The Buddha clearly expressed his support for democratic government through numerous teachings and texts because he thought it was best for upholding social stability.



In the Tipitaka, ideas about good governance are framed in terms of the Cakkavatti's ideal, the king who rules according to Dharmanon; non-violently and righteously. The most famous of the Buddhist rulers, Ashoka's thinking, including his defense of freedom of speech and of the importance of the pursuit of social justice through advancing the welfare and freedom of people in general. He was a proponent of nonviolence and gave up war due to Buddha's dhamma teachings.

Buddhist tradition of public deliberation for individual enlightenment as well as social progress led to extensive institutional developments for communication and joint action.

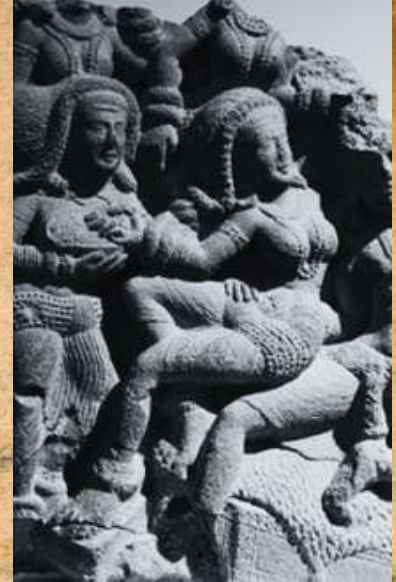
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Indian Constitution's architect also declared in a Radio broadcast speech that he has derived his philosophy of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity from his Master, the Buddha.



## Satavahanas & Democracy

The term 'Dakshinapathpatis' i.e., 'Lords of the Dakshinapatha' in Indian History is ascribed to the Satavahana dynasty which ruled over the Deccan region starting from 100 CE to 300 CE.

From the limited available data, it is established that the 'Amatya' is the highest post held in the administrative system of the Satavahanas and served as an intermediary between the king and the other administrative posts.



The administrative system of Satavahanas resembles the Mauryan administration where the districts and their heads were known as 'Aharas' and 'Amatyas' or 'Mahamatras' respectively. The king was represented as the upholder of Dharma, and to him were assigned new divine attributes.

It should be noted that the Satavahans also gave importance to the women in their administration. Albeit the Satavahanas followed the monarchical system of the government, the creation of various posts at the village level indicates that the monarchy accentuated the role of the residents in the administrative setup.

The incumbency of administrative posts by women during the Satavahana rule upholds the principle of equality which is also mentioned in the Directive Principles of the country.



# Democracy in Indus Valley

Indus civilization, also called Indus valley civilization or Harappan civilization, the earliest known urban culture of the Indian subcontinent. The concept of democracy and welfare state has their roots in Indus Valley Civilisation, with excavations pointing out existence of panchayat system.



There are striking similarities in the lifestyle and socio-culture behaviour of people of Indus Valley Civilisation and that of modern civilisation. Even though the script hasn't been deciphered, it has been well established that the kind of elaborate architecture and standards that existed would have required consensus of people & were impossible to be imposed by an authoritarian regime, e.g perfect planning & use of standard size burnt bricks for construction in Mohenjodaro.

There was also existence of a highly developed & well-monitored civic control system with special attention to sanitation. Another striking similarity of rule of law established by people has been found in the virtually complete series of highly polished stone weights. They provide yet another proof of a civic authority maintaining consistent material standards.

Hence, a sophisticated system of democracy certainly did exist in the Indus Valley times.





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