Bharat: The Cradle of Democratic Ideals and Governance Practices

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper explores the historical and cultural roots of democracy in India, traditionally referred to as "Bharat." While conventional narratives often spotlight ancient Greece as the cradle of democracy, this paper posits a compelling argument, contending that Bharat, with its profound philosophical and societal tenets, has wielded a substantial influence in shaping the contours of democratic governance. Central to this exploration is a meticulous examination of various historical sources and literary treasures that offer profound insights into Bharat's democratic ethos. Drawing upon revered texts such as the Rigveda, the Shanti parva of Mahabharat, the Ramayana, and the corpus of Buddhist philosophy, the paper endeavors to unravel the nuanced layers of democratic thought deeply embedded within India's cultural heritage. Furthermore, it scrutinizes ancient democratic practices such as the "Sabha" and "Samiti," which served as forums for collective decision-making and governance in ancient Indian society. By meticulously dissecting these diverse sources, the research aims to illuminate Bharat's profound contributions to the evolutionary trajectory of democratic principles and governance systems.

Key words: Bharat, Deliberative Democracy, Sabha, and Samiti.

Introduction:

Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister of Education and Skill Development, recently released the book 'India: The Mother of Democracy,' which was prepared and published by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR). According to the book, democracy emerged in India in the fourth century and Tanjore's inscriptions are living proof of this fact. It demonstrates that India has been characterized by democratic ethos since the dawn of civilization, with roots in the Vedas. However, Sumit Guha suggests in his article "Was India the mother of Democracy?" that the new book by the Indian Council of Historical Research, India: The Mother of Democracy (Tanwar and Kadam 2022), is based on a suspicious project of identifying a unique parent of democracy, a single centre from which all democratic institutions have spread (GUHA, 2022). Whether India is the origin of democracy or not has recently become a hot topic of discussion. While the concept of democracy is widely attributed to the Greeks, but a closer inspection of Bharat's historical foundations reveals a parallel tradition that has been a beacon of democratic principles for millennia. In the work of ancient Indian texts such as the Shanti parva of Mahabharat, Rigveda, Ramayana, and Buddhist philosophy. we find traces of political philosophy and administrative practices that echo the essence of democratic governance. These texts provide valuable insights into the early notions of governance, participatory decision-making, and the rule of law in Bharat. Moreover, the democratic practices in ancient Bharat, such as the "Sabha" and "Samiti" assemblies, Vidatha, and the institution of village panchayats, demonstrate a vibrant tradition of decentralized governance and collective decision-making. These early democratic institutions were instrumental in shaping the political landscape of ancient India, fostering a sense of political participation and accountability that mirrors the core tenets of democracy. To appreciate Bharat's significance in the development of democratic thought, it is imperative to engage in a historical analysis of religious scriptures in India, where democratic principles are traditionally thought to have originated.

In the modern context, India has established itself as the world's largest democracy, with a democratic framework enshrined in its constitution. This paper will also discuss the continuity of Bharat's democratic legacy in contemporary Indian governance, examining the challenges and adaptations in the post-independence era. In conclusion, this research paper endeavors to present a comprehensive exploration of Bharat as the mother of democracy.

Definitions of Democracy:

Democracy, a multifaceted concept, has been defined and interpreted by scholars, philosophers, and political thinkers over centuries. One of the earliest definitions stems from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who in his work "Politics," considered democracy as a system in which "the citizens deliberate about justice." In this view, democracy is not just about majority rule but involves active citizen engagement and deliberation in pursuit of justice (Aristotle, 2013). John Locke, a prominent Enlightenment philosopher, contributed to the development of liberal democracy. He defined democracy as "government by the consent of the governed." Locke's concept underscored the importance of individual rights, the rule of law, and the principle that government exists to protect citizens' natural rights (Locke, 1988). Joseph Schumpeter, a 20th-century political economist, offered a different perspective, introducing the concept of "competitive elitism." According to Schumpeter, democracy is a system where citizens periodically choose among

competing elites through elections. He focused on the electoral process as the defining feature of democracy, emphasizing the role of political parties and competition (Schumpeter, 1942). Amartya Sen, a contemporary Nobel laureate in economics, brought a broader perspective to democracy, viewing it to promote development and human capabilities. He argued that democracy is not just about elections but also about enhancing citizens' freedoms, well-being, and their ability to lead fulfilling lives (Sen, 2001)

In contrast, Robert Dahl, a renowned scholar of democracy, proposed a more minimalist definition. He posited that democracy exists when political decisions are made as the result of "public contestation" among competing groups, ensuring that no single group dominates the decision-making process (Dahl, 1971). Furthermore, feminist scholars like Carole Pateman challenged traditional definitions, highlighting the exclusion of women from early democratic practices. Pateman argued that true democracy entails not only political participation but also the inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women, in decision-making processes (Pateman, 1990). In sum, democracy is indeed a debatable concept with diverse interpretations. These definitions, ranging from Aristotle's emphasis on citizen deliberation to Pateman's focus on exclusion of women, reflect the evolving nature of democracy and its various dimensions, from individual rights and freedoms to inclusivity and contestation. Understanding these varied perspectives is essential for analyzing and assessing the democratic claims of nations across the globe.

Historical Context: Shanti Parva of Mahabharata, Ramayana, Buddhist Philosophy, Stone Inscriptions of Uttiramerur

The historical foundations of democracy in Bharat are deeply intertwined with the philosophical and political thought that evolved over millennia. It would not be wrong to say that the principle of democracy is originated from the Vedas. These foundations, found in ancient Indian texts and practices, provide compelling evidence of democratic principles predating the conventional Western narrative of democracy. Within the Mahabharata, there are numerous instances of councils and assemblies where decisions of great importance are made through deliberation and consensus-building. One of the most notable examples is the assembly of elders (Sabha) in the court of Hastinapura. This assembly, presided over by King Yudhishthira, allowed for discussions on governance, justice, and important matters of state. Members of the Sabha were not only advisors to the king but also active participants in the decision-making process, reflecting a democratic approach to governance (Sharma, 1966). Lord Krishna is referred to as sangha Mukhya in the Mahabharata's Shanti parva section, which translates as "Head of the Council." There is a reference in this chapter of the Mahabharata to a dialogue between Krishna and the sage Narada that tells us how the assembly worked (Jayaswal, 1925).

In the Ramayana, Lord Rama was crowned king after his father Dashratha sought consent from the people and his council of ministers. The assembly was advised on all major organizational issues, such as the choice of the ruler or Crown Ruler to declare war, abandonment, or kings. Countersign was critical in forcing a King to quit. The assembly members had the authority to appoint their elective powers (SWARAJ, 2020). Lord Rama's commitment to upholding the rule of law is evident when he willingly accepts exile to the forest to honor his father's promise, even though the decision is heart-wrenching (C. Rajagopalachari, "Ramayana," 1957). This commitment to the rule of law, irrespective of one's status, underscores the principle of equality before the law, a foundational democratic concept. While examining the historical foundations of democracy in Bharat (India), it is essential to delve into the influence of Buddhist philosophy, which made significant contributions to democratic ideals during its historical development. The Buddhist era, which lasted from 600 BC to 200 AD, was marked by active politics, according to Buddhist literature written in Pali. India saw considerable urbanization at the period, which was essentially the same as a republican system of governance. Republican forms of administration were practically common, according to Buddhist literature written in Pali and Brahminical literature written in Sanskrit. The intricate scenario used in the ancient classics to explain the various groups that ran their own affairs is shown. Less significant political structures were referred to as Sreni (guilds), and the groups were typically referred to as Gana or Sangha. In the historical context of ancient India, Buddhist monastic communities, known as the Sangha, practiced consensus decision-making. Important matters were discussed, and decisions were made through collective deliberation and agreement among the members. This practice exemplifies a participatory and democratic approach to decision-making within the Sangha (Lopez, 1990). The Pallava and Chola practices of stone inscriptions have also left us with many vital historical details, and Uttiramerur inscriptions are one of the outstanding legacies of that era. The emphasis on transparency in public life was a distinguishing element of local self-government. The level of detail available regarding the numerous criteria and the election process demonstrates the society's maturity. It contains exceptional data regarding the election process, and it was inscribed by Parantaka Chola I (907-950 CE). Inscriptions also contain specific laws governing Panchayat election rules (PRITAM, 2021). The Rig Veda and Vedic texts also contains references of assemblies and councils, and it also emphasizes on democratic values like:

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सां गचध्वं सां वदध्वं सां वो मनांसि जानताम्
देवा भागं यथा पूर्वे संजानाना उपासते ॥

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"Let us walk together, let us talk together, let our minds be of one accord, as ancient gods, of old, unitedly Served the common purpose with one accord." This shloka from the Rigveda can be seen as a timeless message of unity, collaboration, and the importance of working together for the common good. Within the context of democracy, it encourages citizens to set aside differences, find common ground, and collectively strive for the betterment of their society, drawing inspiration from the harmonious efforts of ancient gods in the past.

Democratic Practices in Ancient Bharat: "Sabha" and "Samiti"

In his book State and Government in India (1949), noted Banaras Hindu University historian Prof Anant Sadashib Altekar writes that the earliest reference to a semblance of democratic rule can be found in the Aitreya Brahmana section of the Rig Veda, where there are references to 'Sabha' (Council) and 'Samiti' (Committee) electing chieftains. According to him, most early republics and city-states were in India's northwestern region and according to a statement in the Rig Vedic Atreya Brahmana, inhabitants in the Himalayan region, such as Uttarakurus and Uttaramadras, lived in a Virat (Kingless) state (Gogwekar, 2022). The Rig Veda is one of Hinduism's oldest sacred books, written in ancient India between 1500 and 1200 BCE, discuss "sabhas" and "samitis," which were important gatherings and councils in Vedic society. These assemblies were forums where citizens could participate in decision-

making processes, discuss policies, and have their voices heard. The concept of gathering and deliberating on matters of governance in a collective manner reflects democratic values (Sharma, 1974).

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समानी व आकूतिः समाना हृदयानि वः ।
समानमस्तु वो मनो यथा वः सुसहासति ॥

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"May your thoughts be similar, and may your hearts be united. Let your minds be in harmony, just as you enjoy good companionship."

This shloka emphasizes the importance of shared values, unity, and harmonious cooperation among citizens to build a strong and vibrant democratic society. It highlights the need for individuals to come together in their thoughts and actions for the collective well-being of the nation, choosing leaders who embody these principles.

A community was called as a 'Jana' in the Rig Vedic era, which was the highest administrative level. In the Rig Vedic period, the term 'Sabha' referred to an assembly. The elders of the 'Jana' took part in the 'Sabha'. Women known as 'Sabhavati' also attended this assembly. This assembly exercised judicial authority, performed administrative and judicial responsibilities, and considered pastoral matters. The folk assembly's political business and discussions were known as 'Samiti'. The 'Samiti' was in charge of electing the 'Rajan'. The 'Samiti' also tackled intellectual concerns in addition to political matters. This assembly was particularly concerned with prayers and religious activities. The Sabha and Samiti are the fictional "twin daughters of Prajapati" who are intended to strive for creation democratically, according to the Arthava Veda. The material world must be produced in the manner proposed by the Sabha and Samiti, and these two chambers must operate in harmony. These two legislative chambers remain the cornerstones of democracy. The Arthava Veda provides special significance to Sabha and gives it an epithet Narishta, which is inviolable and cannot be overridden because majority meets in the assembly and speaks in complete agreement and it is the voice of the others and cannot be overridden by others. So, the Vedic democracy suggest the theory of the Vote of the majority, which is still the principle of every democracy in the world. At the local level, the institution of the "Panchayat" or village council was instrumental in decentralized governance. The Panchayat system allowed for local self-governance, with elected or chosen representatives handling matters related to the village's welfare. This decentralized approach shares similarities with the principles of subsidiarity often associated with modern democratic governance (Sharma, 1974). The Atharva Veda and the Rig Veda both make references to the vidhata, a type of assembly. A more official group called Vidatha convened for discussion about legal issues. Women and senior citizens were among the participants. A judge presided over it; after hearing both sides' arguments, he or she would render a decision. The Vidatha was seen as a just and impartial gathering.

The Mahajanapadas practiced a form of self-governance known as the "Gana" or "Sangha" system. Under this system, governance was collective and participatory. Citizens belonging to the Gana or Sangha collectively made decisions on important matters, reflecting a democratic ethos (Raychaudhuri, 1953). The term gana-sangha or gana-rajya incorporates the term gana which means equal. The term sangha on the other hand means an assembly or rajya or governance. In the system of gana-sangha the head of the family or the head of a clan governed the territory in the model of the assembly to which only members of a particular clan belonged. Sometimes this method of governance was known as a type of democracy. The Vajji Mahajanapada is often cited as an exemplar of a republican system. It had a distinct political structure with an elected council of representatives known as the "Vajjian Sangha." This council was composed of both aristocrats and commoners, emphasizing inclusivity and representation in decision-making (Thapar, 2013). Licchavi, Vaishali, Malak, Madak, Kamboj, etc. are examples of the democratic system of that era. Vaishali's first king Vishal was chosen via election. According to RC mazumdar, Lichchchavi system was ultra-democratic in nature, and its operation provides some insight into the principles of administration in an ancient Indian non-monarchial state. According to an old scripture, a criminal was first sent for trial to a group of policemen known as the Vinichchaya Mahamatta. If the accused was proven innocent, he was released, but if found guilty, he was not condemned but instead transferred to a higher tribunal. There were six such higher tribunals that would serve as judges, with the final one being the President, who alone had the authority to convict and sentence, guided by the Paveni pustaka, or book of law, which also contained prior legal judgements. These historical foundations of democracy in Bharat, as evidenced by the philosophical tenets and practical democratic practices of ancient India, provide a compelling argument for considering Bharat's contribution to the development of democratic principles. Bhagwan Basaveshwara, also known as Basava, was a prominent philosopher, poet, and social reformer in the 12th century. He is revered as the founding saint of the Lingayat sect, which emphasized devotion to Lord Shiva and rejected the caste-based hierarchies of the time. Basava's teachings, often referred to as "Lingayatism" or "Basava Dharma," promoted social equality, religious tolerance, and the empowerment of common people. The Anubhava Mantapa, or "hall of spiritual experience," was a significant institution established by Basava. While it may not be a direct precursor to modern democracy, it had certain democratic elements and played a pivotal role in fostering intellectual and social discourse during its time. It contributed to the evolution of democratic principles like inclusivity and freedom of Expression.

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समानो मन्त्रः समितिः समानी समानं मनः सह चित्तमेषाम्।
समानं मन्त्रमभि मन्त्रये वः समानेन वो हविषा जुहोमि॥

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The shloka taken from Rigveda is often recited to emphasize the importance of equality, unity, and consensus in the functioning of democratic institutions. It underscores the idea that in a democratic society, all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, should come together with a shared purpose and vision, and that leaders should govern with fairness, equality, and a sense of collective responsibility for the betterment of the entire society.

Rigveda (1.164.46)

Post-Independence Democracy in India:

In the aftermath of gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947, India embarked on a remarkable journey toward building a democratic nation that reflected the aspirations and diversity of its populace. The foundation for post-independence democracy was laid in the Indian Constitution, which came into effect on January 26, 1950. The Constitution, guided by the vision of leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, provided a robust framework for governance that sought to secure justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for every citizen. One of the key pillars of post-independence democracy was universal suffrage, ensuring that all adults, regardless of caste, creed, gender, or socio-economic background, had the right to vote. This transformative

step empowered millions who had been marginalized for centuries and reaffirmed India's commitment to democracy. The Indian democracy was built on the principles of pluralism, secularism, and inclusivity. It recognized and celebrated the nation's extraordinary diversity – linguistic, religious, cultural, and regional. India's political landscape soon evolved into a vibrant and dynamic mosaic of political parties, each representing different ideologies and interests. This pluralistic democracy provided a platform for dialogue, negotiation, and peaceful coexistence. The federal structure of governance, where powers were divided between the central and state governments, was another crucial aspect of post-independence democracy. It allowed for local self-governance and accommodated the specific needs and aspirations of different regions.

Throughout its post-independence history, India has experienced periodic elections at various levels of government – local, state, and national. These elections have been held regularly, with a commitment to transparency and fairness, setting a global benchmark for democratic practices. Political parties, ranging from the Indian National Congress to regional parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Shiv Sena, have competed for power, ensuring a competitive and democratic political landscape. One of the most significant achievements of post-independence Indian democracy has been its ability to maintain political stability and continuity despite numerous challenges. The peaceful transfer of power between political parties, even those with vastly different ideologies, has been a hallmark of India's democratic process. This continuity has allowed the country to focus on addressing pressing issues such as poverty alleviation, economic development, and social justice. However, post-independence democracy in India has also faced its share of challenges. Issues like corruption, social inequality, and inadequate access to education and healthcare have persisted, underscoring the ongoing struggle to fully realize the democratic ideals enshrined in the Constitution. Additionally, communal, and religious tensions have periodically erupted, posing threats to the secular fabric of the nation. Nonetheless, Indian democracy has displayed resilience in the face of these challenges. The judiciary, often referred to as the guardian of the Constitution, has played a vital role in upholding democratic principles and ensuring the protection of citizens' rights. Civil society, including NGOs and grassroots movements, has been instrumental in holding the government accountable and advocating for social and political change. In recent years, India's democracy has entered a new phase marked by increased political polarization and a rise in identity politics. The debate over the balance between individual freedoms and collective interests has become more pronounced, with issues like free speech, dissent, and nationalism coming to the forefront. As India continues to navigate these complex dynamics, the strength of its post-independence democracy lies in its ability to adapt and evolve, ensuring that the principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity remain at the heart of the nation's democratic journey.

Conclusion:

In the annals of history and the discourse on democracy, the narrative often centers on Greece as the cradle of this enduring political concept. However, this research paper has embarked on a scholarly journey to broaden our perspective by exploring India, traditionally known as Bharat, as a mother of democracy. Through an in-depth examination of ancient Indian philosophical texts, democratic practices, and the influence of Buddhist philosophy, we have unearthed a profound and compelling story of democratic foundations that predate conventional Western narratives. The historical foundations of democracy in Bharat are deeply rooted in the religious texts like Rigveda, Shanti Parva, and Ramayana, which emphasized the significance of citizen participation, checks and balances, and the role of rulers in ensuring the welfare of the governed. Moreover, the practical democratic practices in ancient Bharat, such as the Sabha, Samiti, Vidatha and Panchayat systems, exemplify early forms of participatory governance that mirror modern democratic principles.

Modern India's democratic framework, enshrined in the Indian Constitution, stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of Bharat's historical foundations of democracy. The challenges and continuities, such as federalism and social justice policies, underscore the adaptability and evolution of these democratic principles to suit contemporary needs. In conclusion, Bharat's legacy as a mother of democracy is a testament to the enduring nature of democratic values. It invites us to broaden our historical horizons and recognize the multifaceted origins of democracy, drawing not only from the West but also from the rich heritage of the Indian subcontinent. The story of democracy in Bharat is a story of ancient wisdom, philosophical depth, and a commitment to governance that empowers the people – a narrative that deserves its rightful place in the annals of democratic history.

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