



Ancient India's Village Republics: The Roots of Decentralized Governance

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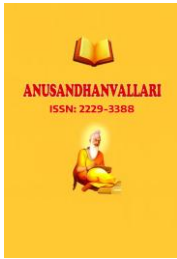
Abstract

The article "Community Life and Governance in Ancient India: A Foundation for Decentralization and Collective Harmony" peeps into the deemed legacy of governance which is verily supposed to be community-based in ancient India. It depicts how vibrant community life shared endurance, values, collaboration, and social capital which seem to be essential for participatory governance, serving to some extent as a defence against tyranny and centralization. Relying on ancient texts such as the Vedas, Manusmriti, Mahabharata, and historical accounts, the article articulates the role of village assemblies (Sabha and Samiti) as the decentralized form of institutions to show how they in their contemporary time cultivate “voices” from ethical oversight and the “voices”, emerging from the method of collective decision-making. Ancient Indian governance often mixed-up regional diversity with universal principles to set a pluralistic society up while maintaining the order to have deeply rooted vernacular systems like panchayats as well. Historical insights, including Charles Metcalfe's observations, illustrate how village communities worked as self-sufficient republics with minimalistic external interference. Economic systems, judiciary procedures, and corporate-like structures also suggest a well-organized, sustainable, and inclusive framework of governance, emphasizing collective harmony and regional autonomy as perpetual pillars of societal buoyancy.

Keywords: Decentralization, Community governance, Village republics, Social capital, Ethical oversight

Community life is needed for setting up a republic, as it stimulates the values, interactions, and collaboration which are necessary for a proper functioning as well as a participatory political system. A vibrant community life encourages people to be involved in public affairs; it nurtures a sense of shared purpose, common values, and collective identity, which are essential for a republic to function cohesively. Community interactions build trust, structural networks, and relationships which are often referred to as social capital. This capital seems to be indispensable to resolve conflicts, sometimes for negotiating policies, and more importantly, for achieving common goals in a republic. Community life often acts as a phenomenon for informal education and awareness of duties, rights, and responsibilities of a civilian, which are crucial elements for an informed electorate in a republic. To some extent a strong community is a rampart against tyranny and authoritarianism. When people are united and informed through sturdy community interactions, they have more likely been able to access their rights and freedom.

Charles Theophilus Metcalfe, British colonial administrator and acting Governor-general of India ((Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.), referred Indian hamlets to “Little Republic”. He applauded the structure of village communities of India. The village communities seem to be little republics, having nearly everything that

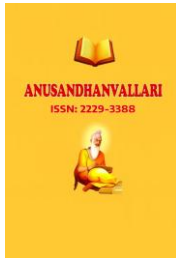


they need to sustain their existence within their own structure, and they are almost independent of any foreign affairs. With the passage of time, dynasty after dynasty tumbles down. Revolution succeeds to revolution, but village communities remain exactly the same. The union of the village communities, while each one forming a little independent state itself, has contributed truly to preserving the people of India, though all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered from, are in a high degree conducive to their happiness and to the enjoyment of freedom and independence. He wished, therefore, the village constitution is never to be disturbed by any means and to drive away every possible process that has a continual tendency to break them up (Mukherjee S, 2014).

Ancient Indian texts including Vedas, Manusmriti, Mahabharata, provided with the cultural insights, philosophical notions and India's historic notes and especially the significance of community lives, traditional community based vernacular governing system. In RigVeda, it is prioritizing unity, collaboration, and shared purposes, reflecting the Vedic ideas of harmony and collective being and becoming. It also talks about the importance of being amiable and of cooperation in the communal and divine sphere and shared spaces, minds, and purposes, advocating for collective consciousness as a set of mutual goals in society. Together the Hymn illustrates the interconnectedness of individuals within a community and the divine, promoting a spirit of unity which is a prerequisite for societal and spiritual harmony (Rigveda, Book 10, Hymn CXCI). The Vedas mention community-based local governance systems termed as Sabha and Samiti replicated all levels of a country's polity. These indigenous panchayat/local governance institutions and systems have existed since the time immemorial keeping the individual and community as its warp and woof (Central Bureau of Communication, n.d.).

The text Atharvaveda shares profound insights into the ancient Indian conception of collective governance and the ethical foundations of assemblies. It examines the roles of the Samiti and Sabha; institutional assemblies are often akin to councils or parliaments whereas cooperative entities are deeply rooted in divine order (Prajapati). It deals with an appeal to these structural bodies for protection, support, and promotion, reflecting a rapt interdependence between the leadership and the process of collective decision-making. The Sabha is getting portrayed as the "adorable favourite of the people"; it emphasizes its role as a well-celebrated institution of wisdom and popular will. Members of the assembly felt an urge to act in unison, demonstrating the ancient emphasis on harmony and collective intent. The speaker honours the knowledge and acknowledges the intentions of the assembly members, reinforcing the ethical commitment of mutual respect and collaboration. Moreover, the text deals with the members to maintain unwavering loyalty to the assembly and its ruler, warning against divided fidelity or distractions. This exemplifies the importance of unity, integrity, and commitment as fundamental elements to effective governance and societal cohesion, offering perpetual principles for deliberative assemblies and their ethical functioning (Atharvaveda (Kanda 7, Sukta 12, Mantra 1–4).

The mentioned texts from the Manusmriti (1.118) (Medhatithi, n.d.) and the Apastamba Dharmasutra deal verily with critical insights into the nuanced understanding of societal laws and cultural diversity in ancient Indian thought-process. The Manusmriti emphasizes the conspectus of laws which once governed regions (Desha), castes (Jati), dynasties (Kula), and specific groups such as heretics and guilds. This reflects a comprehensive approach to jurisprudence, macadamizing diverse societal structures and practices. The Apastamba Dharmasutra (2.7.17) (Unknown Author, n.d), while discussing the rituals to be associated with offering oblations, illustrates an inclusive perspective, having acknowledged the variations in cultural practices, particularly those of the northern regions, without chastising or condemning them. This approach fosters an ancient recognition of pluralism and vernacular diversity, suggesting awareness and tolerance rather than strict uniformity. Both these texts offer a framework to balance universal principles with contextual adaptability, which to some extents are still relevant in modern legal and socio-cultural discourses.

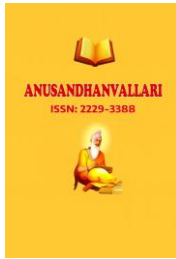


Shanti Parva from the Mahabharata sketches an ancient administrative work-frame to govern villages, decoding decentralization and ethical oversight. It asserts that the supervision by an adviser who happens to be a knowledgeable one in Dharma is essential to ensure fairness and adherence to the existential principles, while the primary concern for village-tasks rests with the villagers themselves. The hierarchical structure of governance described the involvement of headmen at various levels: one for every village, then progressively for clusters of ten, twenty, one hundred, and one thousand villages. This structure, to some extent, ensures a transparent way of command and communication, with the headmen being tasked to protect their villages, addressing issues, and reporting up the administrative hierarchy. Notably, the sustenance of the headmen and supervisors are often tied to the productions of the village, reflecting a self-sustaining and locally supported governance model. This system celebrates the integration of ethical oversight, local accountability, and resource-based sustainability in ancient governance, offering insights into decentralized and community-focused administration (Indic Portal, n.d.).

A passage from Exodus 18 in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible verily asserts that Moses is advised by his father-in-law, Jethro, on how to manage his responsibilities, being a leader. Jethro observes that Moses is often drowned beneath the huge burden of judging the people and it therefore demands a decentralized system of governance. He advises Moses to choose individuals who fear God, are trustworthy, and are never loyal to covetousness; and appoint them to rule over several groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. These appointed leaders would handle minor disputes, leaving only major matters for Moses to resolve. Thus, Jethro tries to lighten his load and create a more effective system (Exodus 18, KJV).

The origin and significance of kingship in India essentialises its traditional role in decentralized form of governance. Kingship came to existence as a response to the people's demands for a central authority to ensure social living in a perfect harmony, particularly when informal understandings or pacts among societal groups were incapable of maintaining order. The conformity to the kingship was deeply rooted in the protection and enforcement of customs, traditions, and its practices carried out by the people themselves. This considers a decentralized foundation, where local conventions and agreements formed the basic foundation of governance. The king's primary concern was to maintain authenticated records of various customs and traditions specific to several regions or distinctive communities within the kingdom. These records played a crucial role in legal disputes, as decisions had to be made in respect of established customs— even if those customs were not aligned with the Dharmashastras— provided with a statement that they certainly adhered to broader dharmik principles. This system verily shares a decentralized and community-centric model of governance, where the king acted as a custodian of local practices instead of imposing uniformed laws. The emphasis on regional and cultural specificity within a larger work-frame of dharma demonstrates how kingship became a balanced authority, signifying decentralized governance (Sharma & Singh, 2010).

Villages, in the Vedic age, were presided over by the Gramani, a respected official who was supposed to work in collaboration with a council of elders known as the Gram Vridhas. Being the head of the village administration, the Gramani held considerable prestige and was often seen as the king's representative in local governance. Ancient texts like the Ramayana highlight the importance of the Gramani, comparing his stature to that of a general. The Gramani's duties walled in defence, tax collection, and leadership of village guards, reflecting a well-structured and cooperative administrative system. This structural model of such governance articulated that the king's authority was effectively implemented at the grassroots level while maintaining the community's collective involvement to be woven with advisory councils (Zamora, 1965). The village headman was considered as the most important officer of the village administration. He was the village magistrate; he had the right to try petty criminal cases. Civic cases were most probably settled by the village panchayats, under the supervision of headman's chairmanship. He was in custody of the village records. A number of epigraphs shows how even the king used to consult formally the village headman at the time of granting a piece of land in the village. He maintained law and order in the village; for this purpose, he had local militia under his own inspections.



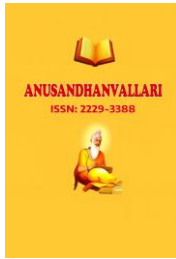
He collected the village revenues and paid them to the royal treasury. When the government demanded to have any 'extra' from villagers, it was the village headman, who used to be in front to carry on negotiations on behalf of the villagers. He protected the villagers against the government officials and it was his prime duty to resist unfair demands. He had to look after the works of public efficacy.

Village autonomy, Under Chandragupta Maurya's oligarchy certified an assay-mark of governance, having a minimalistic approach of interference from the central authority. Each village itself maintained its own Sabha, or assembly, which served as a fulcrum for addressing regional matters. These Sabhas framed community-friendly rules, conducted regular trials to address grievances, and served as an institution for religious, social, and surprisingly recreational activities. Meetings were typically held under shadowy trees, where representatives from village families, elders, and other experienced individuals would gather in a deliberate way to work independently. This tradition of self-governance, which rooted deeply in Indian culture, remained a main source of village administration from ancient times until the British era (Vajiram & Ravi, n.d.).

The quintessential Indian village, as recorded in the Imperial Gazetteer of India, is centred around a residential site with open spaces, served for essential community needs such as having a pond or a cattle stand. Neighbouring this central hub are village lands that include fields for cultivation and, often, grazing grounds or wood-cutting areas. These arable lands are marked with distinct boundaries and are often divided into several smaller plots with earth ridges to retain rainwater or to facilitate irrigation. Life in such villages reflects a harmonious fusing of simplicity and self-sufficiency, having the community functioning under its unique organizational work-frame. Being governed by detailed customary rules and supported by a small group of artisans, traders, and functionaries, these villages celebrate a cohesive and well-structured lifestyle (The Imperial Gazetteer of India).

The genesis of corporate organization in India can be traced back to ancient times, being evidenced by several references from the Rig Veda and the Mahabharata. The Rig Veda mentions the pani, a system of partnership among traders involved in trade caravans, while the Mahabharata describes the sreni, which took after modern corporations. From 1000 BCE to 800 BCE, these organizational forms had been well established, predating Roman corporate prototypes. As claimed by Prof. Vikramaditya S. Khanna, these Indian entities were far more complex and were more detailed than their Roman counterparts, framing India's early expertise in worldly-wise structural business. This historical legacy stretches the idea of having the advanced economic systems that flourished in ancient India ((Khanna, 1987). The table given below highlights the picture:

Characteristics	Modern US Corporation	Ancient Indian Sreni
Separate entity	Yes	Yes
Centralized management	Yes	Yes
Transferability of interest	Yes	Probably yes
Limited liability	Yes (though recently)	Probably not
Agent has power to bind entity?	Yes	Yes
Management elected?	Yes	Yes (though at times appears hereditary)
Can management be removed?	Yes	Yes
Liability insulation	Yes	Yes (less detailed than US)



Formation is easy	Yes	Yes
Register with the state	Yes	Yes
State approval needed	Yes (though week)	Yes
Entry is easy	Yes	Some conditions but no caste bars
Sharing of assets and liabilities	Terms of agreements	Terms of agreements with additional rules
Exit is easy	Yes	Yes, but with obligations potentially
Board/Committee independence	Yes	Probably yes
Other board qualifications	Yes	Yes (less detailed than the US)
Open debate in meetings and shareholder resolutions	Yes, with some limits	Yes, with some limits (but less than in the US)
Transparency is valuable and disclosure encouraged	Yes	Probably yes (less detailed than the US)

The Uttaramerur Inscription from the 10th century CE, often being served as an important historical record, provides with relevant insight into the realm of qualifications, disqualifications, and the election process for the village assembly. In ancient India, the judiciary predominantly comprised elected village elders who formed the spine of the judicial system, which was verily taken after the modern Panchayat system. These village courts, which ultimately reported to the king's council, were governed by strict legal procedures. To act as a judge, candidates are meant to master at least one legal treatise, or dharma sastra, authored by Manu, Yajnavalkya, Brihaspati, or Parasara (Vajiram & Ravi, n.d.). It shows that village courts were looked after by legal experts; it was evidently not the task of casual elders. The 8th-century CE Manur record further stipulates that candidates for village councils should be known for their moral conduct and should be acknowledged to have acceptance from the village assembly. In Brahmin settlements, candidates also had to master one Veda and one Brahmana text and pass an examination to demonstrate their knowledge (Tanwar & Kadam, 2022). Additionally, the Thiruninravur record references a written constitution for the village judiciary, established by the assembly in 930 CE, which highlights that administrative committees served fixed terms. These inscriptions collectively offer a detailed glimpse into the world of organized and well-structured judicial and administrative systems of ancient Indian hamlets (Tamil Arts Academy, n.d.).

The economic anatomy of a village in ancient times was effectively self-sufficient and truly organized, where barter, which was a rare occurrence, was used only in exceptional circumstances or in hard times. The village economy functioned with a sense of mutual respect and community contributions. For instance, during weddings, potters would bring clay utensils, weavers would contribute cloth, and in return, they would receive offerings such as wheat, cloth, and money, symbolizing respect or "samman." Villages were of food security and social harmony, with their own structure, comprising approximately 360 jatis, or occupational communities, each one rooted in specific skill sets. These jatis throughout the year ensured that production was primarily for local consumption, with any surplus to be sold outside the village. Each jati had its own purana, which talked of its traditions and skillfully (Madan, 1951).



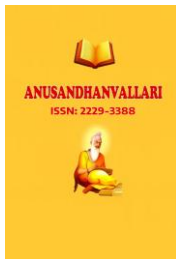
Art and crafts were now and then exported by contemporary merchants to indigenous fairs and local markets; in such cases, the earnings are used to bring back goods from outside. However, an unwritten rule swayed that imported goods were purchased only with earnings made outside the village. Villagers rarely left their community for sustenance, as everyone's needs were met within the local system. It was quite evident that the villagers mastered various scientific pursuits, such as iron extraction, papermaking, mercury extraction, and cosmetics production. Forest dwellers extracted salts from vegetation and soil, whereas household women demonstrated incredible knowledge on how to preserve food, storing rice for up to 16 years and tamarind for up to 20 years. The community did not depend confidently on hotels, shops, or external policing, as the village was self-sufficient and it generally functioned on three doctrines: Gyan (common knowledge), Vigyan (specialized knowledge), and Pragyana (interdependence of nature and humanity). This model of interdependence and mutual respect made ancient villages sustainable and undoubtedly, resourceful.

Under ancient Indian governance, women played a significant role, especially within royal families and administrative affairs. Women were not only respected but also engaged actively to be involved in decision-making and governance. Female sages were held in high regard, and royal women often contributed to political deliberations and administration. Some historical accounts recorded that woman sometimes served as bodyguards and spies during the Mauryan era. The Pandyas also involved women in administrative roles. However, with the passage of time, patriarchal norms rather patriarchy itself cramped women's participation in governance, lowering their influence in political affairs. In spite of having such restrictions, elite women somewhat managed to continue to provide counsel to rulers, demonstrating their enduring significance in governance and policy-making in ancient India (Shinde, 2018).

Ancient India set a worthy example of a pluralistic society, where diverse religions and philosophies coexisted and somewhat influenced significantly the governance and the interactions among the communities. Buddhism and Jainism played a pivotal role in shaping the ethical and administrative frameworks of various kingdoms. The principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and moral righteousness, which are considered to be the central theme to both religions, influenced rulers like Emperor Ashoka, who embraced Buddhism and implemented policies based on dharma (righteousness), welfare, and religious tolerance. Jainism, with its emphasis on truth and austerity, continued to contribute to the ethical governance of rulers who supported policies promoting justice and non-violence. These religions also fostered a spirit of inclusivity, leading to greater social cohesion and interactions between different communities. Monastic institutions established by Buddhists and Jains became seminaries of education and discourse, subsequently enhancing societal harmony. Thus, ancient India's pluralism, enriched by Buddhism and Jainism, laid the foundation for governance which prioritized ethical leadership, social justice, and interfaith cooperation (Testbook, n.d.).

In today's India, several traditional village panchayats still continue to function structurally in their own ways, preserving their existence, upholding ancient traditions, and managing village administration. These traditional panchayats set an example how Indian villages were historically self-sufficient and played a crucial role in shaping a republic by sharing values, social interactions, and collaboration which were deemed to be essential prerequisites for a participatory political system. Some of the well-known traditional village panchayats include the Khap Panchayat in Haryana, Dzumsa in Sikkim, Shalishi Panchayat in West Bengal.

- **Khap Panchayat (Haryana):** The Khap Panchayat of Haryana historically plays a poignant role to conserve the traditions and social structures of rural India. Being originated from ancient tribal councils, these panchayats were originally formed to address internal disputes and maintain proper order within communities. As the time advanced, they evolved into institutions accountable for upholding cultural norms, moral values, and traditional practices. Despite being criticized for their rigid and sometimes controversial rulings, Khap Panchayats still continue to serve village customs, securing adherence to long-standing social codes such as marriage norms, family honor, and community discipline. They regulate various aspects of rural life, from marriage restrictions—



such as prohibiting intra-gotra and inter-caste unions—to reinforcing dress codes and behavioral expectations, especially for women. The Khap Panchayat also plays a role in community welfare, advocating for social issues like discouraging female foeticide and extravagant wedding expenses. Many villagers continue to respect Khap rulings, considering them as a quicker and more culturally aligned alternative to formal judicial processes. While their influence has often led to both praise and controversy, the Khap Panchayats undeniably remain deeply imbibed Haryana's rural fabric, sustaining age-old traditions and making sure that the societal structures of village life endure in a world which is rapidly getting modernized (Lawctopus, n.d.).

- **Dzumsa (Sikkim):** The Dzumsa system of Sikkim, an age-old self-governed institution, continues to look after the traditions and social order of the Lachen and Lachung valleys. Deeply rooted in the historical consequences which resulted in a necessity of managing affairs in remote regions far from central authority, Dzumsa functions as a traditional village council, ensuring law and order, and serving as an effective tool for dispute resolution, taxation, and community welfare. It plays a crucial role to uphold existential cultural norms, maintaining religious customs, and regulating social behaviour, including seasonal migrations, marriage rules, and development initiatives. Celebrating in every aspect its autonomy and resisting external political influences, Dzumsa ensures the continuity of indigenous governance while being a work-frame to adapt the modern challenges. Its role in integrating government schemes while protecting communal values showcases its resilience in maintaining the identity and traditions of Sikkim's villages amidst constantly changing times and spheres (Sikkim Project, n.d.).
- **Shalishi Panchayats (West Bengal):** Salishi Panchayats in West Bengal frequently serve to uphold the traditional dispute resolution system in Indian villages by providing an informal, community-based vernacular mechanism for justice. Rooted in historical arbitrary practices, Salishi is being operated outside the formal legal system, relying on mediation by respected village elders (Shalishidaars). This system has remained resilient over centuries, adapting to societal changes while maintaining its core function of resolving disputes in a way that aligns with jargon customs and moral values. One of the key ways Salishi Panchayats preserve village traditions is to reconcile rather than to get punishment. Their verdicts talk of social harmony, ensuring that families and communities remain intact despite conflicts. This approach is particularly significant in cases of domestic disputes, where women often seek resolution within the framework of their social environment rather than legal separation. It often acts to serve the existence in consonant contrast by doing and discerning. Additionally, Salishi Panchayats uphold communal authority, with their legitimacy derived from the collective moral standards of the village. This traditional governance structure continues to be preferred by many rural populations due to its accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and familiarity. Despite facing criticism for potential biases against marginalized groups, Salishi Panchayats remain to be a pivotal institution in rural West Bengal. Their ability to integrate evolving social norms while retaining the essence of village-based dispute resolution highlights their role as an effective tool to retain the traditional self-sufficient mechanism of governance in Indian villages (Samity, 2003).

Conclusion:

The governance prototype of ancient India, deeply rooted in community interactions, decentralization, and cultural pluralism, often offers prime lessons for modern societies. The integration of ethical oversight, local obedience, and sustainability ensured resilience and harmony within communities. Institutions like the Sabha, Samiti, and village panchayats were not merely administrative entities but served as a platform for practising collective wisdom and decision-making. Ensuring space for regional diversity and fostering interdependence, these systems reinforced the idea of the equilibrium space between individual rights and community responsibilities. The legacy of ancient Indian governance, characterized by its self-sufficient village republics and advanced judicial and economic systems, remains an effective testament to the enduring potential of decentralized administration and community-driven advancement.

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