

Janapadas: An Idea Towards the Establishment of Modern Democracy in India (Concept of Federalism)

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Abstract: *The roots of the Janapada system fall under the concept of federalism, which is the division of the state's powers into small units of governance. In terms of the Indian concept, the roots of the Janapada are intertwined with the writings of Kautilya and the Vedic system, which talks about kingdoms and local levels of government. The local governments were about self-sustainability and self-reliance leading to a better execution of the policies at the central level. The modern notion or theory of federalism is derived from this very ancient thought concerning the state of India. The paper shall focus on a detailed study of the concept of federalism or Janapadas from the Indian perspective while also establishing a link with the Western notion of federalism making it acceptable in the modern notions of world politics. The Janapadas balanced local governance and collective decision-making, fostering a sense of community responsibility. Sabha (assemblies) and Samiti (councils) were instrumental in ensuring participation from diverse groups, laying the groundwork for inclusive governance. Modern democracies can draw from this structure by enhancing grassroots participation, creating robust local governance models, and integrating diverse voices into policymaking. A key innovation from the Janapadas was their focus on economic self-reliance. Each Jana pada thrived through localized trade, agriculture, and resource management, ensuring stability and reducing dependency on centralized power. In the modern context, this approach aligns with concepts of sustainable development and localized economies, which can mitigate the risks of globalization and foster resilience in democratic structures. Furthermore, the ethical and cultural values underpinning the Janapadas, such as dharma (justice) and consensus-building, highlight the importance of morality in governance. By incorporating these principles, contemporary democracies can counter the erosion of trust in political institutions and strengthen social cohesion. This study suggests that revisiting the Janapada system offers a transformative lens to recognize modern challenges, such as political polarization, economic inequality, and the need for environmental sustainability. By blending ancient wisdom with modern tools, democracies can evolve into more participatory, resilient, and inclusive systems, ensuring governance that truly reflects the people's will.*

Keywords: Democracy, Federalism, Governance, Inclusivity, Participation, Resilient

1. Introduction

The term “Janapada” is decoded from the Sanskrit language “Jan,” which means “Person,” and “Pada,” which means “Be on feet” or “Set on feet.” It symbolizes a land where individuals settle and prosper. It signifies the foundation of civilization in the Vedic period. All the individuals from different backgrounds of race grew and established their branches in a particular region. The prominent role of Janapada lies as a cradle of culture and societal norms with governance to frame and secure the identification of people. It mirrors the essence of collective living where people contribute and share thriving on their land through connectivity and a sense of belonging. (Punia. 2019)

From the ancient roots of democracy in Greece invented by Athens to its evolution into modern governance, it emphasized individual participation and equity. The Magna Carta of 1215 laid the foundation for constitutional governance in England paving the way for leaders like Henry IV to frame the balance of royal power and parliamentary authority. His reign symbolized a shift toward accountability and legal reforms that influenced the modern democratic framework. Abraham Lincoln motivated these principles and defined democracy as governance led By the People, For the People, Of the People. To address their necessities as a system extended fairness and equity. The combination of these milestones justifies the crucial role of democracy as a system that adapts to societal needs while preserving its core ideals. (Awasthi 2020)

The concept of federalism and its integration into democratic governance have roots in various ancient systems, including the Janapadas of ancient India. This system emphasized regional autonomy and participatory decision-making a kin role to the principles of modern development of federalism which seeks to balance power between central and local governments. In modern times the evolution of a federal system has been shaped and formalized by thinkers like Montesquieu and implemented through landmarks of the United States to India as a structured governance approach ensuring power division and stabilizing democratic harmony.

The ancient Indian concept of Janapada (Self-governed territories) with local assemblies and collective decision-making offers a fascinating parallel to modern democratic ideals. These early republics such as the Vajji Confederacy functioned through debates and consensus embodying the spirit of governance by the people. Interlinkage Janapadas to Modern Democracy can be seen as prototypes of a participatory or active system that emphasizes a decentralized power. Imagine a storyteller narrated by Wise Grama (Village leader) who gathers villagers under the shade of a Banyan tree to resolve and decide the disputes together. A practice that echoes through time and inspires a global movement toward inclusive governance. These narratives connect ancient systems with modern development in showcasing democracy’s timeless relevance.

2. Evolution of Janapadas during the Vedic period

As delineated by Chakraborty et. al The evolution of Janapadas during the Vedic period, spanning approximately 1100 BCE to 500 BCE, marked a pivotal transformation in ancient Indian society. The rise of these territorial states signified a shift from tribal organizations to more structured and centralized governance systems. This era witnessed the consolidation of socio-political units, with Janapadas emerging as the earliest forms of territorial kingdoms. The socio-economic fabric of the period was significantly influenced by agricultural advancements, trade networks, and the stratification of society through the varna system.

Governance in Janapadas was characterized by assemblies such as Sabhas and Samitis, which played crucial roles in decision-making and conflict resolution, reflecting a proto-republican ethos in some regions. This transformation also brought about socio-economic changes, including the establishment of permanent settlements and the flourishing of trade, which fostered economic interdependence and cultural exchanges among different regions. The Janapadas laid the foundation for the rise of larger political entities like Mahajan padas, eventually leading to the emergence of empires. As such, the evolution of Janapadas was not only a cornerstone in India's political history but also a reflection of the interplay between governance, economy, and social structures in shaping early Indian civilization.

Chaudhary highlights in his interpretation of "Kautilya's Janapada" that the principles of governance outlined in Kautilya's Artha-Shastra emphasize the integral role of leadership in shaping the prosperity and stability of a Janapada. Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, underscores that an effective ruler must prioritize the well-being of the state and its people, maintaining a delicate balance between dharma (moral duty), Artha (economic prosperity), and shakti (power).

Governance as interpreted by Kautilya's principle is anchored in strategic foresight, ethical leadership, and the judicious use of resources, ensuring that the Janapada remains secure, economically vibrant, and socially harmonious. Kautilya advocates for a leadership model that combines pragmatism with ethical considerations, focusing on the welfare of citizens while safeguarding the state's interests against internal discord and external threats. This comprehensive approach to governance illustrates how leadership within a Janapada was not merely an exercise of authority but a deeply integrated practice that aimed to sustain and elevate the socio-political and economic dimensions of the state.

Formation of Janapadas: Laying the Foundation of Democracy and Federalism:

The development of Janapadas in ancient India laid the foundation for democracy by fostering organized governance, regional autonomy, and participatory decision-making. Janapadas, the earliest territorial divisions, marked the transition from tribal systems to settled communities governed by administrative and legal frameworks. These

regions often functioned as self-sufficient units with assemblies, such as Sabhas and Samitis, where decisions on public matters were deliberated collectively. Leaders were often chosen based on merit, consent, or lineage, showcasing an early form of representational governance.

Over time, the growth of Maha-Janapadas brought about centralized yet consultative administrative structures, emphasizing justice, accountability, and inclusivity. These principles resonated with democratic values, forming governance systems' ideological and practical bedrock. The evolution of Janapadas into organized polities exemplified a society's ability to balance authority with public participation, sowing the seeds for later democratic traditions in India.

The evolution of democracy, from the reign of Henry IV to its modern form, reflects gradual institutional development, social reform, and philosophical transformation. Under Henry IV, the seeds of representational governance emerged, emphasizing centralized monarchy tempered by legal frameworks like the Magna Carta, which limited absolute power. This marked the beginning of balancing authority and public consent. Over centuries, the political theories of thinkers like Locke and Rousseau expanded the concept of individual rights and collective sovereignty, influencing the establishment of parliamentary systems and constitutions.

The Industrial Revolution further accelerated social mobility and economic participation, demanding wider suffrage and representation. By the 20th century, global movements for equality and justice transformed democracy into a more inclusive and participatory system, embracing universal suffrage, human rights, and technological advancements that bridged gaps between rulers and the ruled. This evolution underscores democracy's adaptive nature, shaped by historical contexts and societal aspirations for fairness and equality.

The research paper review by Kumar in "An Indian Federalism: Historical Bias" represents a system of governance where power is constitutionally divided between a central authority and constituent political units, ensuring a balance of autonomy and unity. This dynamic structure, particularly within the Indian context, emerges as a nuanced response to the subcontinent's historical diversity and sociopolitical complexities. Indian federalism isn't a mere replication of its Western counterparts but an innovation tailored to India's unique challenges.

While it draws from the classic principles of shared governance, it incorporates a distinct blend of strong central authority and regional flexibility. This balance, often described as "cooperative federalism," is designed to accommodate India's linguistic, cultural, and economic heterogeneity. Furthermore, this paper discusses that India's federal system reflects a historical bias shaped by its colonial legacy, where centralized control was a mechanism of cohesion during the freedom struggle and post-independence nation-building. Yet, Indian federalism remains dynamic, adapting to shifting political landscapes and the demands of its citizenry. Thus, it embodies the spirit of unity in diversity,

striving to harmonize the aspirations of varied regions within a singular national framework.

Transformation of Janapadas into Democracy along with Federalism introduced by East India Company and Crown in the Indian context.

The intricate evolution of India's "unity in diversity" narrative traces its historical roots to the Janapadas phase, a time when ancient India was characterized by a multitude of self-governing territorial entities bound by shared cultural and civilizational values.

The evolution of colonial rule under the British Raj offers a compelling exploration of how the British established and consolidated their power in India, particularly in Delhi, which became a symbol of their imperial dominance. The British strategy to stabilize their rule involved a calculated blend of military might, political manipulation, and cultural symbolism. After the Revolt of 1857 which marked the end of the Mughal Empire's residual authority, the British transferred control from the East India Company to the British Crown, declaring Queen Victoria the Empress of India in 1877. Delhi, with its historical significance as a seat of power under various Indian empires. It was deliberately chosen as the mainstay of colonial administration, underscoring the British intent to root their legitimacy in India's rich political heritage.

The grand Delhi Durbar ceremonies held in 1877, 1903, and 1911 were orchestrated to project the might and benevolence of the British Crown, while the decision to shift the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911 further cemented its status as the nerve mainstay of imperial governance. Kumar and Shastri highlight how architectural marvels like the Rashtrapati Bhavan and India Gate, constructed during the vice royalty era, were designed to blend traditional Indian styles with colonial grandeur, symbolizing the British narrative of being both inheritors and rulers of India's legacy. This calculated amalgamation of political authority, cultural appropriation, and infrastructural development ensured the stabilization and entrenchment of British power in Delhi, making it a focal point of colonial rule until India's independence. (Kumar, K & Shastri, S.2024)

How British colonialism reinterpreted and expanded these indigenous forms of governance into a more centralized and codified structure under the guise of modern democratic principles. The British, leveraging laws and administrative reforms, sought to consolidate their control by institutionalizing diversity within a legal framework that introduced provincial autonomy, communal electorates, and the dual system of governance under the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935. These measures, while designed to divide and rule, inadvertently planted the seeds of federalism and representative democracy, allowing the nation to embrace its pluralistic ethos post-independence. (Chaturvedi. 2003)

The author's feedback towards that the British strategies of territorial and social reorganization were absurd, instrumental in transforming India's ancient Janapada on based decentralization into a unified democratic state, as the

postcolonial leaders tactful adapted these frameworks to balance the country's vast diversity with a cohesive national identity.

The 1930 report review by Schoenfeld while not directly shaping India's constitution, contributed to the discourse on constitutional development during British colonial rule. The British government's approach to governance and constitutional reforms during this period had a significant influence on the way India's future political system was envisioned. Schoenfeld's analysis helped highlight the complexities of India's colonial governance and the necessity for a federal structure to accommodate the country's diversity. The Indian independence movement, led by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, was fundamentally intertwined with this constitutional evolution.

Gandhi's vision of self-rule, rooted in decentralization and Swaraj, provided a framework for the democratic and federal ideals that would later influence the drafting of the Indian Constitution. On the other hand, Nehru's vision aimed to unify the nation by strengthening the central government while acknowledging the importance of states' rights. This period of British rule and the ideologies of leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. It contributed to the eventual formulation of India's constitution by ensuring a balance between central authority and state autonomy. Thus, the colonial period, with its complex political structure and the efforts of key Indian leaders, laid the groundwork for India's transition from British colonial rule to a sovereign federal democratic republic.

India's path to democracy and unity: Patel's role in federalism and integration (1947-1950)

The article delivered by Balasubramaniam and Venkatraman offers a critical examination of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's leadership, both before and immediately following Indian independence. The authors begin with an extended introductory paragraph, outlining how Patel's legal background significantly influenced his approach to implementing federalism and democracy in India. They argue that Patel's legal practice helped him develop a pragmatic understanding of negotiation, consensus-building, and institutional design, which he later applied to the integration of princely states and the consolidation of India's democratic framework.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was one of India's most illustrious freedom fighters and the first Deputy Prime Minister of independent India, carved a significant niche in the nation's history through his relentless dedication, legal acumen, and leadership. Before ascending to the forefront of the independence movement, Patel distinguished himself as a successful barrister, practicing law with integrity and precision. His legal career had not only earned him respect and financial stability but also sharpened his analytical and persuasive skills, which later proved instrumental in his political journey.

Patel's tenure as a lawyer was marked by his unwavering commitment to justice, often taking on cases that underscored his sense of fairness and empathy. However, the turning point

came when he heeded Mahatma Gandhi's call to join the struggle for India's freedom, leaving behind a lucrative career to embrace the cause of self-rule. His legal expertise, combined with his organizational abilities, made him a formidable leader in campaigns like the Bardoli Satyagraha, where his strategic thinking and negotiation skills earned him the title of the "Iron Man of India".

Between 1947 and 1950 Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged as the architect of modern India's unity, displaying extraordinary tact, diplomacy, and strategic acumen in integrating 562 princely states into the Indian Union. As the first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Patel faced the monumental challenge of bringing together a fragmented landscape of princely states, each wielding autonomy, and many reluctant to join the newly independent nation. Recognizing the importance of federalism in building a strong and unified India, Patel devised a pragmatic approach that combined persuasion, negotiation, and, when necessary, decisive action. (Khatke, S.K.M. 2015)

Tasked with the monumental responsibility of organizing 562 princely states, Patel showcased unparalleled diplomacy, tact, and determination in ensuring the successful integration of these diverse territories. In the face of partition-induced chaos, his efforts prevented potential balkanization and laid the foundation for a strong federal system. Patel employed a mix of persuasion, negotiation, and where it was mandatory strategic assertiveness to bring reluctant rulers on board.

His achievement was the integration of contentious regions like Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Kashmir. In Hyderabad, his decisive use of military action through "Operation Polo" ensured the state's accession. Similarly to Junagadh, Patel's firm stance countered the Nawab's attempt to align with Pakistan and secure its integration through a people's referendum. Kashmir presented a unique challenge, with its geostrategic importance and volatile political situation, but Patel's groundwork helped stabilize the region. His meticulous approach also extended to border states, where he prioritized security and administrative cohesion to strengthen India's territorial integrity. Patel's vision of federalism was not merely about political unification but about creating a framework that balanced regional autonomy with national unity, ensuring the seamless integration of diverse cultures, languages, and governance systems into the democratic fabric of India.

Achievements of India's journey: From Janpadas to Thriving Democracy:

The idea of democracy in India, as explored by Pasha, traces its roots to the ancient political systems of the Janapadas, where governance was characterized by collective decision-making through institutions like Samitis and Sabhas. These early democratic assemblies functioned as forums for debate, policy formation, and administration, embodying principles of representation and accountability long before the advent of modern democracy. The Samiti, often referred to as the general assembly, included representatives from various communities and played a crucial role in discussing and deciding on matters of state, while the Sabha, a more select council of elders and leaders, offered guidance and oversight.

Guilds, with their elected heads, also contributed to this proto-democratic structure, ensuring the smooth functioning of economic and trade activities while safeguarding the interests of their members. Leadership in these systems was not hereditary but often based on merit, consensus, or community endorsement, reflecting an early commitment to participatory governance. How these institutions fostered a culture of dialogue, collective responsibility, and the rule of law, forming the bedrock of India's long-standing democratic ethos. This ancient tradition of governance through assemblies and deliberation paved the way for India's seamless transition into a modern democratic republic, making it a unique example of a nation where democratic ideals have deep historical roots. (Pasha. A. 2018)

The underlying layers of India's democratic dominance after independence paper as discussed by Ghosh, highlight the nation's remarkable journey of building a successful governance framework amidst immense diversity and challenges. Emerging from the shadows of colonial rule in 1947, India adopted a democratic system rooted in universal adult franchise, a bold move for a newly independent and socioeconomically diverse nation. This commitment to democracy was reinforced by the drafting of a robust Constitution, which established a framework for federalism, separation of powers, and the protection of fundamental rights.

The author emphasizes that India's governance success lies in its ability to balance central authority with regional autonomy, allowing diverse cultures, languages, and communities to coexist within a unified political structure. Landmark achievements such as the establishment of independent institutions like the Election Commission, the judiciary, and a free press have strengthened accountability and transparency. Additionally, India's democratic resilience is evident in its peaceful transitions of power, periodic elections, and an active civil society that fosters participation and debate.

Even in the face of challenges such as economic disparities, social inequalities, and external threats, India's governance model has continually evolved, adapting to the needs of its people while upholding the principles of democracy. This layered approach to governance, blending ancient traditions of collective decision-making with modern institutional frameworks, has cemented India's place as the world's largest and one of the most vibrant democracies.

3.Conclusion

In conclusion, the Janapadas of ancient India with their structured assemblies and participatory governance laid the philosophical foundation for the modern democratic ethos that India upholds today. This legacy is enriched by the concept of federalism which has been instrumental in shaping a nation that celebrates unity in diversity. Strong leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, with his visionary planning and emphasis on institutional development, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, with his unwavering efforts to unify the princely states, set the cornerstone for a resilient and inclusive democracy. In contemporary times, leaders like Narendra Modi have continued to project India as a global powerhouse,

emphasizing economic growth, digital transformation, and proactive international diplomacy. Together, their contributions reinforce India's positive image as a thriving democracy and a beacon of federal harmony, admired across the world for its ability to balance regional aspirations with national unity.

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