

Component-I (A) – Personal details:



A Gateway to all Post Graduate Courses



An MHRD Project under its National Mission on Education through ICT (NME-ICT)

Subject: **Indian Culture**

Production of Courseware

- Content for Post Graduate Courses



Paper : **Indian Polity**

Module : **Non-Monarchical Polity in Ancient India**



ज्ञानं विज्ञानं विमुक्तये



Development Team

Principal Investigator

Prof. P. Bhaskar Reddy
Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati.

Paper Coordinator(s)

Prof. Suchandra Ghosh
Dept. of AIHC, University of Calcutta.

Content Writer (s)

Dr. Preeta Bhattacharya
Dept. of AIHC, University of Calcutta.

Content Reviewer

Dr. Rita Chaudhuri
Dept. of AIHC, University of Calcutta.

Component-I (B) – Description of module:

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Polity
Module Name/Title	Non-Monarchical Polity in Ancient India
Module Id	IC / POLT / 12
Pre requisites	
Objectives	This module explores alternative polities in Ancient India and their role in the Process of state formation around 6 th century BCE
Keywords	Gana, Sangha, Santhagara, aristocratic council, kin-based polity

E-text (Quadrant-I) :**1. Introduction**

Ancient Indian texts recognise the difference between the political structure of the rajyas or monarchies and the ganas and sanghas, the non-monarchical polities. The Buddhist text Anguttara Nikaya mentions the two mahajanapadas, the Vajji and the Malla, which were sanghas. The texts mention other non-monarchical systems as well- The Sakyas of Kapilavastu, Koliyas of Devadaha and Ramagrama, Bulis of Alakappa, Kalamas of Kesaputta and the Moriyas of Pippalivana. It is interesting to note that most of the ganas were clustered around the Himalayan foothills in eastern India, while the major kingdoms were located on the fertile tracts of the Ganga Valley.

There were two types of ganas- those that consisted of all or a branch of only one clan, e.g., the Sakyas and the Koliyas; and those that comprised a confederation of several clans, like the Vajjis or the Yadavas.

2. Origins of Non-Monarchical Polities

The kin-based units of the Rig Vedic period were apparently the precursors not only of the non-monarchical ganas, but also of the monarchical states. From the clan-tribal collectives of the Vedic period grew class societies and subsequently states, which depending on the character of this development (the ratio of forces in society, the role of aristocratic elements etc.) could assume the form both of monarchies and of republics. The source materials make it possible to speak of two modes of formation of the republic states.

One was the further development of the military democracies characteristic of the late Vedic period into more complex political forms.

Furthermore, one can speak of a transition from monarchical rule to a non-monarchical gana type polity. The texts show a change of the forms of state government saying that the ganas

were the result of the downfall of a monarchy. For example, The Videhas in the later Vedic texts were depicted as a monarchy, but had become a gana by 6th century BCE.

3. Ganas and Sanghas in Early Indian History

The ganas traversed a long and chequered path of development stretching up to the Gupta period. They played an important role on the political map of Ancient India, especially during the struggle of the north Indian states for hegemony in the 5th- 4th centuries B.C.E. After a long struggle with the monarchies the ganas were defeated but quite a few did not lose their independence. Parallel with the progressive development of Ancient Indian society the non-monarchical polities also went through various developmental phases. One thing is clear that there can be no all-round correct understanding of the development of Ancient India without considering the history of the ganas and the sanghas – those which were tribal units and those which already were states with various forms of republican government.

4. Historiography

In Indological literature the question of the ganas and sanghas in general and of the specific features of their organization in particular has already been raised many times, but scholars have still not arrived at any definitive solution of the problem of non-monarchical power in Ancient India. There is no cohesive opinion even with regard to the translations of the terms “gana” and “sangha”. Even the monograph of Y. Mishra(1962), Specially devoted to the history of the gana of the Licchavis, barely touches on the internal structure of this state unit. The well-known British Indologist Rhys Davids(1903) was the first to give due attention to the Ancient Indian sanghas and ganas of the Buddhist era, but in his work “Buddhist India” he described them as “clans” without indicating the considerable difference in the levels of their social and political development. Then the Indian scholar K.P. Jayaswal(1953) went to the other extreme declaring all ganas and sanghas to have been republics and exaggerated their democratic features, thus setting forth a new theoretical approach. Comparisons were made with the republics of Greece and Rome . A lot of this was no doubt to disprove the assertions of Western scholars that the Indians had never known anything other than despotic rule. The tendency towards presenting all political units denoted by the aforementioned two terms as a cohesive phenomenon manifests itself in a number of modern research publications as well.

Scholars exhibit essential differences of opinion not only with regard to the general assessment of the internal organization of the ganas and sanghas, but also with regards to interpreting data contained in individual source materials pertaining to these political units. Later writings of J.P. Sharma and others adopted a more dispassionate approach.

5.1 The Vedic Corpus

The Vedic corpus and even the Rig-Veda contain numerous data with regards to the existence of ganas, which in the period were indubitably tribal collectives. Abundant information points to the military character of the gana organization, in which each adult could bear weapons. With these organization were apparently connected the post- Vedic “sanghas which lived by the weapons” although it would be fairly premature to speak of an organic relationship between the Vedic ganas and the post-Vedic republics mentioned in the later texts.

5.2 Pali Sources

The presence in works of the Pali canon of vast material pertaining to the sanghas and the ganas can be attributed to a great number of circumstances: traditionally, the Buddha himself came from the Sakyas- one of the ganas of Northern India. The Pali texts of the Buddhist canon which have preserved the most detailed account of the sanghas and ganas of the 6th-3rd centuries B.C.E. clearly show that by these two terms were understood political units which are usually contrasted with monarchies but which stood at different social and political levels ranging already from the tribal units to developed states with a non-monarchical government.

5.3 Other Contemporary Literary Sources

Among the Indian source materials which have preserved data pertaining to the political sanghas and ganas special attention is deserved by the grammatical work of Panini, Astadhyayi. Panini's work (Conventionally 5th-4th Centuries B.C.E.) divides the sanghas into a number of groups. It is significant that Panini and his commentators regarded the sangha as a form of political government other than monarchy. The Ashtadhyayi mentions several ganas mostly located around the Punjab region and north western India like the Kshudrakas, Malavas, Ambashthas, Madras, Shibis etc. Among the sanghas Panini set apart the numerous group of ayudhajivi-sanghas, the majority of which were apparently military collectives. Panini divided the ayudhajivi-sanghas in their turn into several groups and singled out in particular, the vratas and pugas, which stood at a still lower social level representing territorial communities which had preserved features of different stages of the clan-tribal system. At the same time, Panini and his commentators have left a great amount of data concerning the politically developed sanghas which can be regarded already as states with a non-monarchical form of government.

The materials of the Arthashastra pertaining to the sanghas are interesting primarily because they outline the monarchies' policy towards these political units, which must have had a considerable military potential. It is not an accident that the Arthashastra' author advised the monarchs (eka-raja) that " the winning over of the sanghas (sangha labha) was more essential than the acquisition of troops or allies, since due to their cohesion the sanghas are unconquerable by others".

5.4 North Indian Buddhist Texts

The later Sanskrit Buddhist text the Avadana Sataka outlines a visit by traders from Madhyadesa to states of Southern India. Asked by Southern Indian king, about the nature of their government, the traders said: "Some countries are ruled by kings, others by ganas. Another Buddhist work, the Civavarastu, states that in Magadha, Sravasti, Varanasi, Rajagrha, Champa etc. political sovereignty is in the hands of one man but Vaisali is under the authority of the gana and what is adopted by ten man (may not) be adopted by twenty. This particularly clearly shows the distinction between monarchical and non-monarchical authority.

5.5 Jain Texts

The author of the Jaina work *Acaranga-sutra*, puts forward a cogent classification of different forms of government. It says that apart from monarchical authority, there were several types of government like- those without a king, those ruled by young royal princes, those governed by two warring monarchs and finally, those under the authority of a gana. No wonder various Ancient Indian texts contain indications to the existence of the power of a gana or sangha as a specific form of polity sharply distinguished from the monarchical structure. To the Ancient Indians the existence of principalities with non-monarchical government – that of a gana or sangha – was not an unusual or rare phenomenon.

5.6 Foreign Accounts

The Greek participants in the campaign of Alexander furnished a great amount of evidence based on which the later classical chroniclers wove together connected accounts about India, its people and forms of government. Thus, for instance, the states of Poros, Ambhi and Taxila were the monarchies, while there were also the so called autonomous states – independent countries and poleis. This division was particularly clearly expressed by Diodorus that The majority of the poleis have become democratic. The territories were divided into two main categories based on the form of government – with monarchical and non-monarchical rule. Megasthenes, who visited India at the very end of the 4th century B.C.E., in describing the sixth class of the population – “the observers” – wrote that “they report all that is going on India to the kings and in the cities (polis) which have no royal power to the authorities.” Megasthenes also made the fairly interesting observation that in India the agriculturists pay taxes to kings or to the autonomous (self-governing) poleis (Arr., Ind., XI,9). It is fairly indicative that some of the principalities of North-Western and Western-India described by the Greeks as “autonomous” states are described in Indian texts as sanghas and ganas.

The analysis of the Graeco-Roman accounts about the “autonomous” poleis and regions which as a whole correspond to the Ancient Indian sanghas and ganas make it possible to identify a number of characteristic features of their political organization such as the absence of a hereditary monarchical ruler, the electiveness of chiefs and head, the presence of different forms of government, the preservation in some ganas and sanghas of a great role of the council of the nobles and of a considerable influence of the council of the elders.

5.7 Archaeological Evidence

Names of ganas like the Yaudheyas, Arjunayanas, Malavas and Uddehikas occur on coins of early centuries CE and some are also mentioned in inscriptions. In 4th century CE, Chandragupta I married a Licchavi princess Kumaradevi, and this union was commemorated on gold coins. Samudragupta is known as Licchavi-douhitra (Grandson of the Licchavis) in inscriptions.

6. Main features of political organization:

6.1. Absence of a Hereditary Monarchy

As shown earlier, the states under discussion had no hereditary monarchs. The head of the gana, who usually bore the title of raja or senapati or pramukha, was appointed by the gana, by which he could, under certain circumstances, be replaced. The Indian ganas were not democracies. Power was vested in the hands of an aristocracy comprising the heads of Kshatriya families. Later texts offer many details about the workings of the gana system especially of the Licchavis. The Civaravastu says that after the death of the head of the gana of the Licchavis its headship went to Khanda, a former dignitary of the Magadhan king Bimbisara. Khanda resided in Vaishali, and took an active part in the gana's session. It should be noted that the gana was as an active agent which solved the question of rulership, who was supposed to satisfy its desires and aspirations. That was precisely what the Vaishali gana was guided by in appointing Simha, Khanda's younger son as senapati. Judging by the Civaravastu text, the gana could solve the question of appointing the senapati even in the absence of the candidate, announcing the decision to the future senapati after coming to a collective decision. The Mahabharata emphasized that the gana's head is its servant. According to Kautilya, the head was to coordinate his actions with the thoughts and intentions of all the other members of the association. Apparently, the gana's head, as a rule, was responsible to the gana and had executive authority. Although the Civaravastu as a whole says that the post of senapati – the head of gana – was not inheritable and that his authority was exercised within certain limits, some data should apparently be taken to mean that notions of inheriting authority were already in existence.

6.2. Dominance of the Kshatriyas

Despite the broad basis of the political structure, the gana's head apparently was to be a Ksatriya. This is shown both by concrete examples to be found in the texts and by the general character of the class structure of these republican states. The Mahavastu (III, 179-180) says that when one of the Sakyas, Upali, a barber son, addressed the Sakyas' head, Suddhodana, by his name, some of his councillors grew indignant at the fact that Upali, who belonged to the low-born had dared call the head of the Sakyas by the name. It is tempting to tie in this story with that of Patanjali saying only Ksatriyas received a special position in the sanghas.

Apart from the hereditary elite – various other groups – Brahmanas, farmers, artisans, wage labourers, slaves and others lived in these principalities and had a subordinate position. The Gilgit texts of the Vinaya say that the gana included Brahmanas and Vaisyas. The fact that the gana included Brahmanas and Vaisyas is supported with particular clarity by the Civaravastu.

Ksatriya rule can be particularly clearly observed in the case of the Sakyas although Ksatriya authority was so great and affiliation to this varna so determining that in many texts (both Brahmanical and Buddhist) some ganas are denoted as Ksatriyan. In the sanghas and ganas the Ksatriyas constituted the highest privileged group of equal inhabitants separated from the rest of the population. The influence of precisely the Ksatriyan families and their role in the ganas and sanghas are clearly expressed in the Kunala-Jataka saying that the

rajakulas had to step in when a dispute broke out between the Sakyas and Koliyas – two non-monarchical state units over access to river waters.

In the republics the free inhabitants who were not members of the Ksatriya varna had a right to attend gana meetings but apparently leading posts were adorned by Kshatriyas. Buddhaghosa's commentary to the Digha-Nikaya helps to establish that the "gana's chiefs" were representatives of the Ksatriyas who bore the title of 'raja' . Data of the epics, alongside those of other texts clearly show the distinctive position of the Ksatriyas, who wielded the greatest power, from the rest of the ganas. Judging by the available materials, it was precisely the Ksatriyas-rajases who held session in the santhagara – a special hall for discussing all key questions.

6.3 The Role of the Santhagara

The santhagara played an important role in the gana's political life. Jatakas contain accounts of meetings convened by the Sakya rajases to resolve momentous issues. Texts describe not only the santhagara meetings of Ksatriya-rajases at the Sakya gana, but also of other ganas, for instance, that of the Mallas and the Licchavis. The evidence makes it possible to distinguish the gana meetings which could apparently be attended by all free inhabitants . Out of them, the Ksatriya-rajases, constituted a kind of aristocratic council. The leading role of the Ksatriyas in the ganas can also be clearly traced from the Arthashastra. According to Kautilya, a sangha member could be sentenced or rejected only by those who bore the title of raja. It should be noted that the supremacy of the military aristocracy is pointed out not only by Indian sources, but also by Graeco-Roman authors, who were well informed about the political administration of the states of North-Western and Western India.

The general assembly met at the Santhagara. Effective executive power and day to day political management must have been in the hands of a smaller group. Ekapanna Jataka states that the Licchavis were ruled by 7707 kings and a similar number of uparajases, senapatis (military commanders) and bhandagarikas (treasurers). The preamble to Chullakalinga Jataka comes up with the the fabulous figure of 7707 again that refers to the ruling Kshatriya families of Vaishali . The source says they engaged in disputations and debates in the assembly. Though these figures can not be taken literally, it can be assumed that the Licchavis had a fairly large assembly consisting of the heads and patriarchs of the ruling Kshatriya families, who called themselves rajases. They usually met once a year during the spring festival to transact important business and also to elect a leader , who had a fixed tenure. Day-to-day administrative matters were dealt with by a smaller council of nine, who carried out business in the name of the general assembly.

It is quite possible that the organisation of the Buddhist sanghas were modelled on the administration of the aristocratic republics like the Licchavis. The commentary on the Digha Nikaya describes how the Buddha himself had immense admiration for the Licchavi gana and opined that as long as the Licchavi gana conducted regular and full sessions of the assembly, they would be invulnerable. If the procedures of the Buddhist monastic order provide any clue to the functions of the gana assembly, it can be assumed that probably the meetings at the santhagara commenced with the beatings of a drum and there may have been a regulator of seats . The votes were cast with pieces of wood known as shalakases, which were collected by an official known for his honesty and impartiality- the salaka –

gahapaka. The major deliberations required a quorum, which would be ensured by the gana-puraka.

6.4 The Authority of the Gana

The term gana signified not only a territorial unit with a special form of rule, but also a body of power. The Majjhima-Nikaya (I,230-231) compares a gana and sangha to a monarchy ; within their territories they possess enough authority to kill, punish and banish whoever so deserves. The source material says , that whatever the form of authority, whether a king or a gana, had considerable – in some case almost unassailable authority with respect to the inhabitants of these states. It was precisely the gana that adopted basic decisions whose implementation was regarded as obligatory. The texts recount that the Vaisali gana published a number of decisions which were concerned, in particular, with marriage and individual questions involving internal regulations. The non-observance of these decisions was punishable by a fine. The culprit could even be executed.

The gana being the highest body of a government all questions concerned with the regulations in the country were subject to coordination with it. Apparently, the gana also looked into the case of individual citizens of the state. The gana appointed special persons in order to carry out its decisions. Thus the gana was regarded as its country's highest legislative body invested with administrative, judicial and apparently financial functions. Despite the scantiness of available relevant data it can be inferred that the gana's meeting was something like popular assembly open for attendance by all free equal inhabitants. One of the most essential questions is that of virtual authority in the republican associations. It is clear that the character of these republics were to a considerable extent determined by whether their highest body of government represented the people or only a small group of the aristocracy. The available source materials permit to speak, if only in a general form, of different type of republican authority in Ancient India. In some states great authority was preserved by the gana's popular assembly, in others virtual power was concentrated in the hands of the aristocratic council.

Regrettably, we have no data which could permit to correlate the meetings of the gana with those of the rajas – the aristocratic council. Possibly, the questions were first discussed in the gana the final decisions being adopted by the aristocratic council. This to a considerable extent was determined by the character of the authority : in some ganas there still remained fairly strong democratic principles of administration and a great role was played by the popular assembly, in others – in the aristocratic republics – the leading position was occupied already by the council of the military aristocracy.

7. Decline of the sangha system

The history of the ganas of Ancient India spans over a thousand years at the least. The gana's greatest asset –governance through discussion –was also their greatest weakness. They were prone to internal dissensions especially when confronted with aggressive monarchies .

The powerful monarchies of the time were equipped with a standing army sustained by the state. It is possible that this practice of recruiting permanent troops were not in existence in the ganas.

The ganas had greater vestiges of tribal organisations than the monarchies. Due to this kin-based structure and Kshatriya exclusivity, they were inherently incapable of expansion unlike the monarchies.

The military defeats of the Sakyas and the Vajjis at the hands of monarchical states like Kosala and Magadha can be seen as the result of the inability of their system of governance and military organisation to meet the challenges of the forces of empire building.

However, the persistence of the ganas/sanghas in Indian history was quite remarkable, especially in the northern and western regions. Though they were conquered periodically, they continued to reappear. The Arjunayanas, the Malavas and the Yaudheyas for example appear on coins on 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. Subsequently most of the earlier ganas in Rajasthan including the Malavas and Yaudheyas were forced to accept Gupta suzerainty in 4th century CE, as a result of Samudragupta's military conquest.

8. Summary

Around 6th century BCE the middle Ganga valley witnessed the crystallization of stratified societies and development of the state system. Against this backdrop we have roughly contemporary texts which consciously differentiate between the monarchy or rajya and the gana or the sangha as two distinctive types of polity. It has been argued that both the monarchy and the non-monarchical system or gana had a common origin—namely the older gana or the tribal collective mentioned in the Vedic corpus, which had features of an archaic military democracy. However, it is difficult to trace an organic relationship between the Vedic gana and the post-Vedic gana or sangha. Most of the ganas were clustered around the Himalayan foothills in eastern India. However, we have another concentration of non-monarchical systems, presumably older, in North-Western and Western India. The ganas located in the middle Ganga valley were touched by this process of state formation and were complex polities at a later stage of development, while the Western ganas retained distinctive traces of tribal organisation. Buddhist and Jain sources as well as texts like Arthashastra shed light on the internal organisation of the Eastern ganas. The key features of the ganas are the absence of a hereditary monarchy and the fact that Power was vested in the hands of an aristocracy comprising the heads of Kshatriya families. Despite the broad basis of the political structure, the gana was dominated by the Kshatriyas. The general assembly chose the leader to preside over the gana, while routine administration was carried out by a smaller body in the name of the general council. Some of the powerful ganas competed with the monarchical powers for a while, but due to the inherent nature of their system of governance and military organisation most of them collapsed in the face of the aggressive expansionist challenge put up by the monarchies. However, the persistence of the ganas/sanghas in Indian history was quite remarkable, especially in the northern and western regions. Though they were conquered periodically, they continued to reappear. The Arjunayanas, the Malavas and the Yaudheyas for example appear on coins on 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. Subsequently most of the earlier ganas in Rajasthan including the Malavas and Yaudheyas were forced to accept Gupta suzerainty in 4th century CE, as a result of Samudragupta's military conquest.