

**POWER TO THE PRAJA:  
THE INTERPLAY OF ANCIENT AND MODERN DEMOCRATIC  
TRADITIONS IN INDIA'S CIVIL LANDSCAPE**

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*It has become a byword in international studies to extol India's constant championship of democratic mechanisms such as elections and constitutional bodies while speaking simultaneously of the failure of comprehensively viewed Indian democracy, evinced by the constant reports of national corruption, poverty, communalism, and various other social corrosives disintegrating the fabric of the Indian polity. Using currently available scholarship on ancient and modern trends in civil society, this paper argues that these failures can be attributed in part to the fact that Indian civil society is currently paralyzed by tumultuous structural interface between classical Vedic-inflected notions of civil society, represented collectively here as the "praja-tantra" tradition, and its modern counterpart, the heavily Western liberal democratic ethos of the 1940s Republic. The aims of this paper are to: 1) demonstrate the differences between the two temporal and cultural styles of democracy by documenting their influences and historical trajectories, 2) evaluate their suitability for present challenges facing the Indian democratic apparatus, and 3) propose avenues for further study and possible synthesis of these two traditions of Indian structural democracy.*

In the decades since the end of the Cold War and the establishment of American cultural hegemony, Western liberal democracy has emerged as the touchstone of modern civilization, and often the arbiter by which a region's progressiveness, international relationships, and standards of living are assessed by the international community. Various international statutes and the means of their creation adhere to both the ideals and the reproductive mechanisms of Western liberal democracy. All over the world, even in the most remote locations, elections, parliaments, constitutions, and democratic political activity proliferate among well-informed citizens. Societies that are perceived as moving 'towards' democratic ideals are lauded and facilitated by the international community, while those moving 'away' are regarded with concern, occasionally even outright hostility.

This paradigm has almost certainly resulted in a binary view of democracy, wherein states and populations are deemed either to possess it or not, and not to fall somewhere within a continuum of various democratic behaviors as is usually the case for an 'emerging' society (Fortman, 1995). Democracy is in practice reduced to an umbrella designation for a set of political behaviors, rather than an evolving and often subjective ethos from which desirable political behaviors may arise. As the variegation among the spectrum of democratic behaviors is negated by the international gaze, so too are the cultural, social, and locational variations that may result in varying appearances of democracy among different nations. Since these indigenous democratic institutions and practices may not immediately call to mind analogues in Western liberal

democracy, they are often discarded by political scientists and policymakers alike, resulting in the attempt to impose a Western liberal ideal of democratic behavior onto a culture where local, more effective forms of democracy may already exist.

The consequences of this sort of 'imported' democracy—or indeed, of any 'imported' political ideal—can be as dire as those of a slipshod decision to substitute an external crop for one which was previously homegrown and well-received in abundance. Accessibility to the new crop may be controlled by the intelligentsia or other authority responsible for the substitution, resulting in nearly instant marginalization of large sectors of society, and those accustomed and familiar with the old crop will naturally struggle with the shape of things in the newly restructuring economy. Something similar can be said to have occurred in India, as the world's largest democracy is home to not only one but two coexisting democratic traditions: the modern culture of democracy as propagated by the 1940s Nehruvian ideal of the Republic—for the purposes of this paper referred to as Republic democracy—and the older and far more nebulous ideal of *praja-tantra*, the "rule of those who inhabit the land," a Vedic precursor of democracy which still has a significant practical hold on democratic practice in rural India today. While both of these traditions exhibit the participatory culture and concern for individual freedom indicative of the most liberal democratic ideals, they differ greatly in terms of their goals, practices, and methods of propagation.

This paper will attempt to show how political neglect of these differences may

have led to many of what are considered the present-day failures of Republic democracy. It will begin by analyzing the major influences and historical trajectory of Republic democracy, followed by a list of its perceived failings, then provide a similar overview of the *praja-tantra* tradition and what this indigenous model may offer to help revitalize India's holistic culture of democracy.

### **Influences and Trajectory of Republic Democracy in India**

By all accounts, the centerpiece of Republic democracy is India's Constitution, widely considered the seminal end product of over two centuries of refining the ideal colonial manifesto against authoritarian power and assertion of democratic ideals for the modern world. This is in part because of the multiplicity of influences from which the Indian Constitution draws, among them the ideals of Enlightenment humanism, the Virginia Declaration of Human Rights, the Constitution of the United States, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and even the original Constitution of the former Soviet Union (Van der Burg, p. 1995). Numerous scholars have analyzed in detail the multiplicity of sources from which the Indian Constitution draws, its fascination with emulating British and American governmental mechanisms (Chadda, 2000), and its flawless adherence to the then-current ideals of human rights and universal sovereignty from Geneva to Washington (De Waart, 1995). These scholars have all documented in detail the birth pangs surrounding the creation of the Indian Constitution, the repeated references to Western models, and the fevered consultation of external legal and judicial

authorities before the document was finally created, a resplendent example for the international community and a perceived triumph of universal modern values.

Today, many scholars believe that this process was not entirely as idealistic as formerly believed, but in many ways calculated towards ensuring that larger world powers—primarily the Americans—would be amenable to understanding, sympathizing with, and eventually allying with the fledgling republic. Despite India's purported No Alliance policy, the country quickly became dependent on the Americans for various purposes from diplomatic assistance to foreign direct investment, and India's strict adherence to American visualizations of democracy were almost certainly influential in the process of securing foreign aid and recognition from the international community. At a time when alliance bloc politics were still very much in vogue, Indian political leaders were astute in their projection of a firm democratic ethos characterized by near-constant elections, political campaigning, and the ratification, formation, and public engagement of political parties. Apart from the tumultuous period of the Indian Emergency, for which the Indira Gandhi government was almost universally shunned, India has always been commended for its Constitutional and procedural championship of democracy.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Western liberal democratic ideals and mechanisms have always been major shaping forces in the creation and solidification of Republic democracy. They can certainly be considered its impetus for the first half century of India's independence, as well as its guiding principles. Observing the

historical trajectory of Republic democracy as it is practiced, however, other central patterns also begin to emerge. First, the tendency of the Republic democracy to champion principles of centralization, religious plurality, and economic growth (Chande, p. 220), and second, the popular trend of the Republic government to fluctuate reactively between the two power nodes of the country's prominent political parties (Chadda, p. 50), the Bharatiya Janta Party and the Congress Party.

### Shortcomings of Republic Democracy

According to Chadda, this preoccupation with presenting a modernized political state to the divided international community was one of the four major challenges faced by Republic democracy, the others being a) the creation of a composite national identity, b) the balance of power and dynamics of power-sharing between the diverse regions and the central state, and 3) the issue of state governance and resource management. Out of these challenges, how many have actually been met by India's present democratic culture?

As far as the creation of a national identity goes, it is an issue that Indian reformers have struggled with since the time of the Maurya dynasty over six centuries ago and that each has described as a nearly impossible task made more difficult by India's natural diversity, multiplicity of languages, and plurality of religious and cultural expression. Democracy has thus far failed to provide total national unification of any sort other than the merely logistical, as the multiple violent uprisings from groups as diverse as the Naxalites to the Bajrang Dal might indicate. Whatever their individual

reasons, it is clear that the India visualized by these groups is not the present-day India, making democracy seem more like an arbitrary intellectual construction than a true political culture that expresses the national identity of a people. According to Van der Burg, in fact, the void democratic engagement should have filled has instead been addressed through the two trends which are *actually* most important in Indian politics today: secularism and religious fundamentalism (Van der Burg, 1995). It is an astonishing fact that today, India's major political constituencies do not feud publicly over economic policy, poverty issues, class conflict, or any of the other major issues affecting the survival of the average citizen today, but over flashpoint communal conflicts and deliberately provocative religious laws such as the separate civil codes. Both secularism and religious fundamentalism, argues Burg, are natural continuations of the same realization: the *politicos'* understanding that democratic engagement as it stands is not addressing the reality or desires of the Indian public.

The issue of governance is one that, according to many scholars, has been completely abandoned by Republic democracy. Most scholars are able to immediately identify a host of problems with Indian democratic administration as it stands, including the complete failure of economic development, rampant corruption, divisiveness and the absence of bipartisanship, the disintegration of civil society, and political apathy to the situation of average citizens (Chande, 1999). In the 1996 elections in Uttar Pradesh, for instance, one in ten candidates for the elections had a serious criminal record for murder, rape,

theft, or extortion, a fact which did not prevent 40 of these effective gangsters from being elected to the Lok Sabha as MPs. The immensity of the political machine as well as a host of other factors including expense, insufficient bureaucratic resources, and a culture of military clout among powerful individual families make prosecution or transparency nearly impossible, and completely unwise given the corresponding failure of the ponderous, creakingly inefficient Indian judicial system.

The overwhelming difficulty of accomplishing anything meaningful within the public sphere of Republic democracy has also resulted in an alarming erosion of civil society, with actors serving as objects—consumers of election-related propaganda or bribes, for instance—rather than agents or participants—organizers of protests, marches, or press coverage, for example (Jayal, 2007). The Indian public at large has shifted its role in civil society to the bestowing of allegiances or public affiliation with a party; it no longer serves as a major voice in vetting bureaucratic behavior, demanding transparency from authority, or drafting relevant legislation. Jobs for youth in government, one of the major indicators of the vibrancy of a country's civil society, have dwindled through the medium of the IAS examinations to mere bureaucratic sinecures with no significant effect on politics.

Whatever the political position of the speaker, development issues are at the heart of almost every criticism of Republic democracy. Despite its rampant modernization and proliferating urban centers, India is still one of the poorest

countries in the world as measured by statistics of average income and GDP per capita. Its human rights record is execrable; India has, as of 2009, the highest standing female infanticide rate in the world, a shameful state of affairs that has—even more shamefully—yet to be meaningfully addressed by either of the two major political bodies. In 2008, the international Human Rights Watch as well as its partner organizations in Geneva described India as a stagnant breeding ground for social ills, particularly corruption and rape, and one of the most unsafe locales in the world for women—a designation which, once again, goes unaddressed year after year by those in power. While all major democracies are plagued with problems, India's is unique in that its democratic leaders have failed in even such basic measures as alleviating poverty and ensuring basic health care and education for all its constituents (Deb, 2009). In perhaps the most damning statistic of all, the average quality of life for rural Indians (about seventy to eighty per cent of all Indians in most estimates) *has not improved at all since Independence* according to multiple assessments (Deb 2009, Chadda 2000, Chande 1999), leaving one to question what on earth Republic democracy *has* succeeded in accomplishing over the last sixty-odd years.

One of the major arguments in favor of Republic democracy is that a series of laws *have* indeed been passed addressing each of these issues, including the many laws against female foeticide, bride burning, and dowry cases passed in numerous High Court cases over the years. However, in many cases improper infrastructure and widespread corruption prevents these laws

from having any meaningful effect, as can be seen in the 1999 Rajasthan sting operation exposing numerous doctors performing abortions on female children, in which despite indisputable evidence courts simply did not take any action against the perpetrators until 2012. Cases such as these elucidate another characteristic of Republic democracy: that of increasing bureaucracy to solve the numerous problems plaguing the Indian state—of essentially increasing the machinery of the system, rather than acknowledging that there may be an inherent problem with the system itself that prevents it from carrying out its assigned functions.

When any political culture so emphatically flaunts and disregards the state and interests of its citizens, forecloses any possibility of change, and mistakenly brandishes the sanctifying label of a democracy it does not endorse in practice, reassessment is wholly necessary and intervention desired from any source possible. Although cultural relativism will always be an ongoing debate among political scientists, it is evident to all that Republic democracy as it stands in India has been so ineffective in addressing the population's most basic problems that there is clearly some disconnect between its present mechanisms and practice and the general abilities, desires, needs, and proclivities of the overall population. This is where an existent, active, indigenous democratic tradition, such as that of *praja-tantra*, may prove useful in bridging the gap between political expectations and popular reality.

### **Influences and Trajectory of Praja-Tantra Democracy in India**

Translated literally, the word *praja* means "children," and in its earliest use in the Atharva Veda appears to indicate a contextual inflection close to "children of the land." In practice, it seems to mean merely "polity," in particular the polity of a king or other regent, but has a host of other connotations which will be discussed at a later time. One major consideration emerges in all depictions of *praja*, however: it is an institution in which an individual must actively make use of his membership to retain it, in which membership is conferred by participation and not simply presence (Mishra, 2004), making it one of the earliest forms of truly participatory democratic assembly in the world.

The word gained popularity around the late seventh century B.C., but the term *praja-tantra* would have been unfamiliar to the Indians of far antiquity, who conceptualized democratic engagement primarily through three *praja*-like institutions, namely the *sabha*, the *samiti*, and the *vidatha*. Each of these terms refers to a political institution which was very small and served various functions in early Vedic society (circa 500 B.C.) with minute differences in functioning and organization. These bodies were social, as gathering places for villagers of all stripes to meet and engage in dialogue on whatever issues they desired irrespective of caste, religion, or occupation (Sharma, 1999)—there are even references to villagers using these bodies to congregate for the purpose of singing or athletic games (Mishra, 2004). They were legal and judicial entities, the *samiti* in particular serving a role of adjudication for disputes such as land ownership, marriage negotiations, and allocation of crops and herds. Most of all

they were legislative, with members of the *sabha* creating oral legislation that quickly became practice through sung and storied village history. In each of these groups, democratic engagement was based on discourse, dialogue, and accessibility rather than on mechanisms such as elections or votes—there are, for instance, no recorded instances of voting mentioned in Vedic depictions of these bodies, but there are certainly many instances of consensus-based decision making (Sharma, 1999) and lively debate (Mehta, 2006).

Knowledge of these early democratic groups comes mainly from their mention in various scriptural texts, namely the Rig Veda, proving that since antiquity they have been part of the foundational tenets of Indian society. According to these sources, minor variations in function and organization can be discerned. The *sabha*, for instance, seems to have served a mainly legislative purpose as the makers of laws were all described to come from the *sabha*. It is also the only body that did not impose preconditions on vital membership; the *sabha* was by definition open to all, including—unusually for the time period—the young as well as women, both of whom were described as *sabhavati*, or worthy of a seat in the *sabha* (Sharma, 1999). Because the *sabha* seems to have been held with great regularity, sometimes even at the beginning and end of various days, it can be considered to hold the role of a watchdog or accountability organization in relation to the other two bodies. The *samiti* did impose preconditions, asking of its members that they have the benefit of age and experience, and its function seems to have been largely punitive and judicial, authorized to dispense

punishment and enunciate for neighboring villages the disgrace and pardonment of various villagers. The *vidatha*, lastly, seems to be the closest antecedent to the classic *praja*, a body subject to the whims of an external ruler which nonetheless kept the ruler strictly accountable, and was privy to all his decisions and whims. In the Rig Veda, the *vidatha* is mentioned over one hundred times, twice the amount of the *sabha* and *samiti*, and even the courts of the gods and other deities are described as *vidatha* to which all actions were accountable (Sharma, 1999). It seems that as India entered its so-called Golden Age, the *vidatha* came to serve the urban functions of the *sabha* and *samiti* in village life, and eventually to be replaced by the *praja*, which seems to have been its close analogue. In the Atharva Veda, *sabha* and *samiti* are described as two daughters of the Vedic deity *prajapati* (Mishra, 2004), implying their consolidation into one body which served as the foundation of civil life.

It is critical to note that these three bodies are all local in nature and character, presuming a proximity of citizens, a predilection to interaction with one another, and a linguistic ability to communicate with one another that would be foolish at best in the immensity and complexity of modern India. One wonders what role was played by the larger nation or national identity in the conceptualization of these democratic bodies. This is where another term, *gana*, enters the discussion of ancient Indian democratic systems. Mentioned in the Rig Veda a total of forty-six times, this word is roughly translated as *republic* only in that it implies a grandeur and largeness of scale as well as a people's participation to uphold the concept. However, the most important

dimension of the word's use is that it was strictly military rather than political, social, legislative, or judicial—it was used only when evoking the necessity of sending, say, men or elephants to the front, never when discussing any of the peacetime duties of civic life (Scharfe, 1993). It can be inferred, therefore, that even if a national character did exude authority over citizens of the Vedic time period, it was only in matter of military participation. In the rest, democracy was a matter of local and regional bodies. Had it been a national matter, small intensive bodies such as the *sabha* and *samiti* could hardly have functioned.

By far the most popular exposition of *praja-tantra*, however, comes not from the Vedic canon but from one of the later and most controversial exponents, the Ramayana. The Ramayana takes place at what is considered the height of the Vedic Golden Age, and its illustration of democracy even among the most unpalatable and undesirable circumstances is most poignantly illustrated within the story of Sita's banishment. According to the Valmiki Ramayana, Rama was held accountable for Sita's status during exile by a washerman who called him to question and subsequently banished his innocent wife from the kingdom altogether, demonstrating the complete powerlessness of the king when taken to task by a virtuous and devoted subject—a member of the *praja*.

There have been as many exegetical interpretations of this baffling incident as there are variations of the Ramayana story. Even for the most casual reader a myriad of questions naturally arises from the story, foremost among them how

exactly the washerman can be considered virtuous for suggesting the banishment of a completely blameless person, or for holding Rama 'accountable' for a so-called 'sin' no one particularly understood or in fact, considered sinful. These questions are certainly pressing and have never been satisfactorily answered by the scores of Hindu pundits who discourse upon them, but for the purposes of this analysis, they are also irrelevant. It is not the *outcome* or *content* of the decision which is indicative of *praja* philosophy; it is the *method* by which the decision is made: a washerman makes a demand, Rama, the supreme regent and ultimate leader, is compelled by forces beyond his control to follow it. What are these forces? Although it is a well-known principle of all forms of democracy that authority should derive from the consent of the governed, where, in this case, does that consent spring from? What is the source of the washerman's power, and subsequently, the latent power of the entire *praja* itself?

The answer to this question is perhaps the absolute foundation of *praja* philosophy, and can be explored in detail by closely analyzing the differences of *praja-tantra* democracy with Republic democracy and its professed and practiced ideals.

### Reenvisioning Democracy as Praja-Tantra

The basic difference between Republic democracy as it stands and *praja-tantra* democracy is centralization. This paper does not attempt to make any value judgments as to which system is 'superior' or 'preferable,' merely to demonstrate through contrast those tenets of an existing

and still very common system of democratic engagement indigenous to India in the hopes that elements may prove effective in recalibrating the ailing warhorse of Republic democracy, as well as explaining some of its failures to truly take hold in the consciousness of the greater Indian public.

Even through a cursory survey of the two democratic traditions, it becomes clear that centralization is at the heart of the clash between *praja-tantra* democracy and Republic democracy. Centralization is very much a closely held value of Republic democracy, and is in fact considered one of the primary reasons India's democracy was able to survive in the wake of Partition. The savior Congress Party's interests in consolidating governmental mechanisms, ensuring unilateral legislative and judicial bodies, and maintaining a strong regional character through an inextricably linked web of government officials have persisted in the character of the Indian government up to this day (Chadda, 2000). The BJP, Congress' major opponent, is just as strong in its insistence on centralization. In fact, the very basis of the Hindu fundamentalism upon which the BJP acquires the majority of its constituents is founded on the necessity of a *national* consciousness to supersede *local* consciousness; the habit of placing gigantic pictures of India in temples, for instance, was first proposed by BJP-friendly Arya Samaj to cultivate a sense of national loyalty above all.

In *praja-tantra*, however, centralization is not only undesirable but completely impossible. From the very beginning of Vedic democracy, the *Manu Smriti*, it is clear that the state regents—if any such

offices were even considered at all—were intended to serve strictly military roles, and that it was with the village bodies and village headmen that lawmaking and judicial duties lay (Sharma, 1999), indicating a complete departure from any kind of centralization policy. In the Ramayana itself, Rama is described as the ultimate ruler *only for Ayodhya*—diverse other cities have their own rulers and regents, and tribes such as Vali's people are completely autonomous of the established ruling party. During the classical period, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*—a document written at the absolute height of centralization fervor!—was vocal in its insistence that without strong village institutions to supervise autonomous lawmaking within regional areas, the *praja* would perish and the kingship rendered meaningless. The twentieth century's major *praja*-centric reformer, Jayaprakash Narayan, vehemently insisted up to his death that the two-party system had completely degenerated democracy, and that individual village governments with only administrative liaisons to the central government were more expressive of the public conception of Indian democracy that *already vibrantly existed in all villages* (Sharma, 1999). The greatest advocate of *praja-tantra*, as well as its most famous, Mahatma Gandhi, was adamant enough in his views on decentralization that he even decried the value of industrialization and globalization, stating that these were only mechanisms to create a national locus of power to disenfranchise the masses. Gandhi was against all political measures that could even indirectly lead to centralization, including and up to the establishment of central boards of schools, and in his *Hind Swaraj* advocated completely self-

sustaining villages governed by, as Narayan supported, a Gram Mandal in each village with one representative from each village family. Many scholars and politicians up to and including Manmohan Singh suggest, in fact, that the Raj and the Republic were actually the first major forms of central authority the Indian public has ever known (Mehta, 2006) and hence many citizens are outright unable to cope with or function meaningfully within the power structure mandated by these essentially foreign impositions.

Perhaps the most succinct and telling description of why centralization has failed to prove effective for the Indian public comes from Gandhi's pronouncement that "Whatever occurs in the government, the Indian village remains completely unaffected." India is simply too large and multifarious for centralized authority, and as multiple attempts to reinvent the civil code have proven, the demands of various populations are completely foreign to the nexus of power located in North Indian Delhi, where many are unfamiliar with the greater trials of Indian citizens. Religious centralization, another major facet of Republic democracy (largely through the BJP and its affiliated institutions) is even more unlikely to solve India's problems, as the complexity of the religious experience in India—more often characterized by syncretism than by communal tension (Van der Burg, 1995)—cannot be contained or mandated by top-down religious authorities as political figures currently attempt to accomplish. As Mehta eloquently states, the Hinduism of antiquity—and the Hinduism still practiced today in Indian villages and rural areas—"may have been hierarchical,

but it was at the same time so diverse that Hindu society was nearly impervious to projects for imposing centralized uniformity." (Mehta, 2006)

The greatest advantage of *praja-tantra* decentralization as it stands is the simple logistical ability to provide greater opportunities for civic and economic enhancement for the average citizen, and therefore extend the reach and possibilities of democratic culture. Early *praja* focused extensively on the education and welfare of individual citizens, their rehabilitation and personal development, and their family lives; this was considered not a corollary to but a necessary precondition of Vedic democracy. The *pra-* of *praja* has connotations of "enlightened," and the *vid-* of *vidatha* is literally translated as "knowledgeable." It is for this reason that the most technically powerful caste at work within the system, the brahmins, worked within the educational system of *gurukul*, considering themselves participants in democratic culture through the creation of civil and educated citizenry. According to Vedic democracy scholar Donald Brown, in fact:

Politics in Indian thought was considered the 'master science,' since, dealing with dharma, it covered that vast range of human relationships...the 'firmament of law.' In this respect, dharma is the creator of the state, and political science is more than a study of government. (Brown, 1958)

For Sharma, this was reflected in the simple fact that the "virtue and existence of the state hinged upon that of its constituents." (Sharma, 1999) Virtue, public accountability, and transparency

were critical to both the person of the king or regent (Oldenburg, 2010) and the various branches of the citizenry itself (Reddy, 2004), leading to the symbiotic relationship between king and populace that still persists in many Indian villages, evinced by the fact that former kings were the candidates who both earned most of the vote in their districts in the first municipal elections and maintained the districts most free of communal violence (Blank, 2000). These opportunities for civic and individual development are simply impossible under the aegis of Republic democracy, but under the rule of the *praja*, they were central and indispensable, meted out by rulers who were able to do so because of the essential democratic attribute of decentralization.

### Cultivating the *Praja* Ethos in Modern Democratic Culture

Systematic analysis of the characteristics of *praja* governance, as undertaken here, indicates that the failure of attempts to nurture *praja* models in Indian villages—such as the Himanchal Pradesh Lokpal Bill, for instance—may be due to their ignorance of a fundamental trait of the *praja* model: its regional adaptability and highly specific local flair (Chaudhary 1998). Because the *praja* evolves depending on the a served populace's specific needs, desires, and resources, it is nearly impossible to mandate a stock *praja* based on what has worked in one particular village. In fact, Chaudhary even states that in the Himalayas, the *praja* traditions of different villages are so drastically different from one another that the inhabitants of several villages refused even to have them written down. In spite of this insularity and variability, however, there are several traits endemic to all *praja* systems

which can be cultivated even in India's present democratic society, regardless of the external bureaucratic model:

### 1. Central Philosophical Values: Self-Reliance, Social Welfare, Dharma

One of the central features of all *praja* is that in the absence of any foundational treatise,

unifying founder, or other central organizational feature of modern civilizational units, the motivating factor in many of their decisions must stem from India's religious texts. In many cases, this motivation comes from one of the only Indian philosophical ideas which remains uncontested across all religious and political texts of India's history: the notion of *dharma* (Brown, 1958). As the ideal of freedom functions as an ultimate justification and end in Western political thought and Enlightenment ideals, so the notion of *dharma* functions in Indian political thought, ranging from the dharma-based unification rhetoric of Chanakya to the filial dharma espoused by Rama in the Ramayana. Indian democratic thought, even in its modern-day incarnation, could do well to recognize the influence of this value in village life, indicating its understanding of the principle by incorporating the *praja's* insistence on defined roles in society, expected contributions from each member in society, and strongly defined paths for the disenfranchised to regain necessary standing in terms of employment and education.

Due to this insistence on *dharma* and adherence to spiritually understood roles as a bedrock of the Indian social contract, self-reliance is another key value of all

*praja* systems. *Praja* democracies generally do not provide monetary support or other mandated aid programs, although individual *prajas* may make a decision to provide a particular family with support on a case-by-case basis. The *praja's* preoccupation with social welfare indicates that the needs of a particular individual, family, or institution are paramount only *so far as* they contribute to the greater social value of the system. However, as noted in the Ramayana story, this should ideally result in a remarkable lack of interference in the personal lives of citizenry, as dissenting opinions are valid and acceptable *so long as* they originate from a functioning, contributing, and mature i.e. dharmic member of society. In the *praja* system participation in the social contract is contingent upon the ability to adhere to it in the first place, a system which has great potential for abuse of power related to the relativism of value-based reasoning in a judicial context.

### 2. Link Between Individual Development And Society

Another distinctive aspect of *praja* governance is the strong codependent link between spiritual, economic, and mental development of the individual and the individual's right to possess and exercise political power. This can be seen in the earliest *praja* societies all of which required "standing" of some sort to participate, usually in the form of either adult householders, widows (who had been householders at one point) or nomination by other members of the *praja* (Mishra, 2004). Children, unmarried laborers, and others considered in some way deviant to the "duties" of society were not considered participants in the *praja*. Although modern

village life arguably cannot and should not impose a prescribed definition of proper duties on a general populace, *prajas* in all regions of India still demand certain standards of education and employment from their members, indicating that the development of the self as an *informed* and *participating* citizen is a necessary precondition for both a stake and a voice in society.

### 3. Microcosmic Organization And Scalability

Another method of organizing society upon a *praja* ethos without actually changing the prevalent democratic structure may be to employ another characteristic of *praja* systems: to organize smaller bodies of power as microcosms of the macrocosmic governing body. For example, one of the most vibrant examples of *praja*-style governance—involving all the hallmarks of the style, such as consensus-based decision-making, regional adaptability, *dharma* as arbiter of social contribution, and other honored values of the style—was the *gurukul*, the ancient Indian system of education which in large *gurukul* worked remarkably similar to a *praja* assembly. The interactions of its teachers and student body were very similar to the relations between *praja* and populace, and in general, the schools' method of discipline and punitive measures were very similar to those used by modern *praja* today. Continuing in this vein, banks, legislative assemblies, and even landlords in many Indian villages still follow this style of governance, even if their village political systems are instead governed by the more regimented

*panchayats*. The social and political civic training provided by these "mini-*prajas*" may have helped citizens adjust to and understand the requirements of the habits of a larger *praja*, establishing *praja* as a conditioning/socialization process and organizational unit of society—an endemic, grassroots habit of citizenship rather than a top-down, imposed structure of mandated political participation.

### Avenues for Further Study

Although no significant analyses of the qualities of *praja* and village democracies has ever been undertaken by an academic institution, village life is nonetheless romanticized and glamorized by politicians, non-resident Indians, and others who have an interest in portraying a sort of untouched, utopian India of the past. This sort of unconditional whitewashing has resulted in severe polarization between those who are unconditionally apologetic of Republic democracy and those who are unconditionally critical of it. This simplistic binary is harmful to true academic study of village democracy, and should be circumvented in order to truly understand why it is that Republic democracy has failed to live up to its promise, and where village democracy has succeeded in doing so. Various unpalatable elements of village democracy, such as its sexism, brutality, and corruption by vested interests such as landed or educated families also should not be overlooked in these analyses but evaluated in the context of how *praja* democracy has or has not given rise to such occurrences.

In conclusion, this paper has simply

endeavored to provide an introductory primer to Republic and *praja-tantra* styles of democracy, illustrate their provenance and incidence of clashes, and propose certain elements in their construction that may serve to provide for a better, more truly democratic India. It is firmly hoped that these two democratic style may be negotiated more productively by future scholars, so that India may truly earn its status as one of the great democracies of the world.

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