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Evolution of Election in Ancient India: A Historical and Legal Analysis of Representative Institutions, Voting Practices and Local Self-Government

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of electoral practices in India is often read through the development of modern parliamentary democracy. However, historical sources indicate that ancient India had several institutional practices involving collective deliberation, leadership selection and local administration. This article traces the development of these practices from the Vedic assemblies of Sabha and Samiti to the republican institutions of the Mahajanapada period, the decision-making procedures of the Buddhist Sangha and the village administration of the Chola dynasty. Particular attention is given to the Kudavolai system described in the Uttaramerur inscriptions, which prescribed eligibility conditions, selection procedures and accountability mechanisms for village committee membership. The article uses a historical and doctrinal approach, relying on ancient literary texts, epigraphic evidence and constitutional provisions. It argues that although these institutions cannot be equated with modern universal electoral democracy, they demonstrate the historical presence of organised collective governance and provide an important perspective on the evolution of representative and local self-government institutions in India.

Keywords: *Ancient Indian Democracy, Electoral Practices, Sabha, Samiti, Kudavolai System, Gana-Sanghas*

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy and elections are often associated with constitutional government, especially with the arrival of voting rights for all adults and of representative bodies. In India, however, the history of this association goes back well before the constitutional democracy that began in 1950. Ancient Indian political traditions included assemblies, republics and village-level bodies that allowed some sections of society to take part in decision-making.

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The Vedic texts refer to assemblies such as the Sabha and the Samiti, which formed part of the decision-making process in early Vedic society. Later, during the Mahajanapada era, some political communities known as Gana-Sanghas developed methods of deciding collectively and of choosing leaders. Buddhist monastic communities also had settled rules for meetings and for resolving disputes, including voting with *salaka*, which were voting sticks or tickets.[1]

An important development came under the Chola rulers, when the Uttaramerur inscriptions of the tenth century CE described how members of village committees were chosen by the Kudavolai system. These inscriptions are historical evidence of organised local government, of the rules on who could and could not be chosen, and of how members were selected.[2]

This article examines these institutions through a doctrinal and historical reading of ancient literary sources, chiefly the Rig Veda, the Buddhist Vinaya literature and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, of the epigraphic evidence from Uttaramerur and of Articles 326 and 243K of the Constitution, with particular attention to the limits of interpreting ancient institutions through contemporary democratic concepts.

II. Political assemblies during the Vedic period

A. Early Vedic period: Sabha, Samiti and Vidatha (1500–1000 BCE)

Literary sources for the early Vedic period provide information about collective political institutions in India. Society was organised around tribal communities headed by a Raja. Although leadership was vested in the king, governance was also associated with assemblies known as the Sabha, the Samiti and the Vidatha.

The Sabha was a smaller assembly of respected, noble and elder members of the community; it performed deliberative and advisory functions and acted as a forum for discussing important social and political matters. The Samiti is commonly interpreted as a broader tribal assembly in which members took part in discussions concerning community affairs and kingship. The Vidatha was an older institution, associated with religious, social, economic and military activities.[3]

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[1] R.C. Majumdar et al. eds., The Vedic Age 356 (The History and Culture of the Indian People vol. I, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan 1951); Digha Nikaya, *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, DN 16; Vinaya Pitaka, Cullavagga IV.9.

[2] V. Venkayya, *Two Inscriptions at Uttaramallur*, in Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report 1904 –05 131–45 (1908); P. Bhaskar Reddy, *The Cholas*, in Outlines of Indian History ch. 16 (INFLIBNET e-PG Pathshala), https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/icp01/chapter/the-cholas/ (last visited Nov. 20, 2026).

[3] Rig Veda 10.97.6, 10.191.2–4; A.S. Altekar, State and Government in Ancient India 95–100 (Motilal Banarsidass 1949); Romila Thapar, From Lineage to State: Social Formations of the Mid-First Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley 55–57 (Oxford Univ. Press 1991).

These assemblies indicate that political authority in early Vedic society was not wholly separate from collective decision and consultation. The Rig Veda refers to gatherings of members and to the importance of common deliberation, and certain passages have been interpreted as indicating the relationship between the king and the Samiti.[4] These references cannot, however, be treated as conclusive proof of a regular electoral system. The literary evidence does not establish universal voting, individual electoral constituencies or a formal secret ballot.

B. Later Vedic period: decline of participatory institutions (1000–600 BCE)

During the Later Vedic period, political organisation underwent a considerable transformation. The expansion of territorial kingdoms and the strengthening of monarchical authority gradually changed the earlier tribal structure. Succession became hereditary, and as a result the decision-making authority of the Sabha and the Samiti declined.

The king came to hold greater authority over administration, military affairs and revenue collection. The assemblies continued to exist, but their role became increasingly advisory rather than independently decision-making. This transition shows that participatory political arrangements in ancient India were neither permanent nor uniform; the political and social conditions of each period had a great influence over the administration.[5]

III. Mahajanapada period and the Gana-Sanghas (c. 600–321 BCE)

The Mahajanapada period represents an important stage in the development of non-monarchical political institutions in India. Although several Mahajanapadas were governed by hereditary monarchs, some states followed political arrangements commonly described as Gana-Sanghas; prominent examples are the Vajji confederacy, of which the Licchavis were the leading clan, the Mallas and the Sakyas. These polities functioned through assemblies in which members deliberated on public affairs and took part in decisions concerning administration and leadership.[6]

The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* refers to the political organisation of the Vajjis. It identifies regular assemblies, collective deliberation, harmonious conduct and respect for established practices as conditions contributing to the stability of the community, and it shows the importance attached to collective responsibility.[7]

[4] Rig Veda 10.97.6, 10.173–74, 10.191.2–4.
[5] Thapar, *supra* note 3, at 55–57, 122–23; Altekar, *supra* note 3, at 99–100.
[6] Thapar, *supra* note 3, at 70–115.
[7] Digha Nikaya, *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, DN 16.1.4, in The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya (Maurice Walshe trans., Wisdom Publications 1995).

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The Gana-Sanghas should not, however, be equated with modern democratic republics. Political participation was generally confined to the members of particular ruling clans, the *raja-kulas*, while slaves and hired labourers (*dasa-karmakaras*) and others outside the ruling lineages were excluded. The Gana-Sanghas did not give equal political rights to every inhabitant, and the existence of an assembly does not mean that the entire population took part in governing the state and in its decisions.[8]

The significance of this period lies in its demonstration that authority could be exercised collectively, with decisions taken by voting among the members of the ruling clans, rather than being concentrated entirely in a hereditary monarch.[9] This stage is important for the development of deliberative and representative institutions.

IV. Voting procedures in the Buddhist Sangha

Buddhist literature provides valuable evidence of organised voting procedures in ancient India. The Vinaya Pitaka, which contains the rules governing the administration and discipline of the Buddhist monastic community, describes procedures for resolving disputes and reaching collective decisions.

One important procedure was known as *Yebhuyyasika*, under which certain disputes could be settled by the vote of the majority. The text provides for voting by *salaka* (voting tickets) and for the appointment of a *Shalakagrahaka*, the officer responsible for distributing and collecting the tickets and for administering the process, who was to be free from partiality, malice, folly and fear and to know which votes had been taken and which had not.[10] The role is comparable in some respects to that of a present-day returning officer. The text also distinguishes the cases in which the taking of votes is valid from those in which it is invalid.[11] These provisions show that majority decision-making was accompanied by institutional safeguards intended to prevent manipulation.

It is, however, important to distinguish voting within the Buddhist Sangha from elections to public political office. The procedure operated within a religious community and was governed by its internal disciplinary rules. Similarly, the use of voting tickets does not by itself establish the existence of a modern secret ballot. Its significance lies in the development of organised

[8] Thapar, *supra* note 3, at 78–80.
[9] *Id.* at 79.
[10] Vinaya Pitaka, Cullavagga IV.9, in Vinaya Texts, Part III 24–26 (T.W. Rhys Davids & Hermann Oldenberg trans., Sacred Books of the East vol. XX, Clarendon Press 1885).
[11] *Id.* Cullavagga IV.10, at 26–27.

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voting and institutional decision-making rather than in any assumption of complete democratic equality.

V. Mauryan and Gupta periods: centralisation and local administration

A. Mauryan period (c. 321–185 BCE)

The Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta Maurya marked the emergence of a highly centralised imperial administration. Unlike the republican arrangements of certain Mahajanapadas, the Mauryan political system was predominantly monarchical, with the emperor exercising supreme political authority.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* provides valuable information about the organisation of government, the appointment of ministers, taxation, military administration and the responsibilities of public officials. Its discussion of ministerial appointments rests on competence, loyalty, experience and suitability for administrative responsibility.[12]

There is no established evidence of a regular electoral procedure for selecting the Mauryan emperor or senior administrative officers. Political authority was exercised primarily through kingship and an organised administrative structure. The Mauryan period thus saw a shift towards centralised government rather than the continuation of republican electoral arrangements.

B. Gupta period (c. 320–550 CE)

The Gupta period also saw the continuation of hereditary monarchy. The highest political position was occupied by the king, who was assisted by provincial and local officers in administering the kingdom.

At the village level, local institutions continued to perform functions relating to land, revenue, irrigation and community administration, which indicates that local participation remained relevant even within a predominantly monarchical political structure.[13]

Again, the available evidence does not establish a formal electoral system comparable to the later Chola village administration. The Gupta period is therefore significant for the continuation of local administrative participation rather than for the development of a systematic electoral process.

[12] Kautilya, The Arthashastra bk. I, chs. 8–9 (R. Shamasastry trans., 1915).
[13] R.S. Sharma, India's Ancient Past (Oxford Univ. Press 2005).

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VI. Sangam Age (300 BCE–300 CE)

The Sangam Age represents an important phase in the political and administrative history of South India. The Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas emerged as the major political powers, with hereditary succession as the principal basis of kingship.

Sangam literature provides information about the administration, economic activities and social organisation of these kingdoms. Although local bodies took part in managing community affairs, there is no conclusive evidence of a formal popular electoral system for selecting kings.[14]

At the village level, each settlement had its *manram*, a common meeting place, generally under the shade of a large tree, where the villagers gathered for their common activities, while the *sabha* or *manram* of the king in the capital served as the highest court of justice, in which the elders helped to settle disputes. Nilakanta Sastri suggests that these rural gatherings may also have had a political side and may have been the germ of the highly organised village government of Chola times. Such arrangements indicate that local life was not entirely dependent on the direct rule of the king.[15]

The importance of the Sangam Age lies in its evidence of local organisation alongside hereditary kingship. However, it would be speculative to claim that these institutions developed directly into the Chola electoral system. The later Chola inscriptions provide independent and considerably more detailed evidence of organised village committee selection.

VII. Chola administration and the Kudavolai system

A. Uttaramerur inscriptions: historical and legal significance

The Chola period provides some of the most significant epigraphic evidence of organised local administration in ancient India. The Uttaramerur inscriptions of the reign of Parantaka I, particularly the records dated to his twelfth and fourteenth regnal years, approximately 919 and 921 CE, set out the organisation of the village assembly and the procedure for selecting members of its administrative committees.[16]

These inscriptions are engraved on the walls of the Vaikuntha Perumal temple at Uttaramerur in present-day Tamil Nadu. They describe the functioning of the village Sabha and its

[14] K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar 126–28 (Oxford Univ. Press 1955).
[15] *Id.* at 127–28.
[16] Venkayya, *supra* note 2, at 131–36; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, Studies in Cola History and Administration 131, 169–74 (Univ. of Madras 1932).

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specialised committees, known as *variyams*, which were concerned with different branches of village administration, including tanks, gardens, gold and other public responsibilities. The importance of these records lies in their detailed treatment of committee membership. They prescribe qualifications, disqualifications and procedures for selection, which together demonstrate an established framework of rules for local governance.

B. Kudavolai: the procedure of selection

The Kudavolai system was the method adopted for selecting members of the village administrative committees. The term combines *kudam*, meaning a pot, and *olai*, referring to a palm-leaf ticket.

Under this procedure, the eligible candidates of each village ward were identified. Their names were written on palm-leaf tickets, and the tickets of each ward were bundled together and placed inside a pot. Tickets were then drawn in a prescribed manner, and the persons whose names were drawn became members of the relevant committees.[17]

The 921 CE inscription describes a system of thirty wards. The draw was held at a full meeting of the assembly, young and old, with safeguards intended to ensure that it could be witnessed by all present. The eldest of the temple priests held the pot up in view of everyone, a young boy who could not tell one thing from another drew the ticket, and the arbitrator (*madhyastha*) read out the name, which the priests then read in turn before it was written down.[18]

This procedure is historically significant because it combined preliminary scrutiny of candidates with selection by lot. It reduced the possibility of influence over the final selection and provided an organised method of constituting village administrative bodies.

The Kudavolai system cannot, however, be described as identical to a modern competitive election. The candidates were first screened according to prescribed eligibility conditions, after which selection took place by drawing lots rather than by individual voters choosing between competing candidates. It is therefore more accurate to describe it as a structured, lot-based system of selection within local self-government.

[17] Venkayya, *supra* note 2, at 142–44; Nilakanta Sastri, STUDIES IN COLA HISTORY AND ADMINISTRATION, *supra* note 16, at 171–73.
[18] Venkayya, *supra* note 2, at 142, 144; Nilakanta Sastri, STUDIES IN COLA HISTORY AND ADMINISTRATION, *supra* note 16, at 154–55, 173.

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C. Qualifications, disqualifications and accountability

One of the most remarkable features of the Uttaramerur inscriptions is their detailed treatment of eligibility for public office. Under the inscription of 921 CE, the people of each ward were to write on the pot-tickets only the names of those who satisfied the following qualifications:[19]

1. A candidate had to be more than thirty-five and less than seventy years of age.
2. He had to own more than a quarter *veli* of tax-paying land, although a person who had learnt one Veda and one of the four *Bhashyas* could qualify with one-eighth of a *veli*.
3. He had to live in a house built on his own site.
4. He had to know the *Mantrabrahmana* and have experience of teaching it.
5. He had to be well conversant with business and virtuous, with honest earnings and a pure mind.
6. He must not have served on any of the committees during the preceding three years, a rule that allowed broader participation in village administration.

The inscriptions also prescribed disqualifications. A person who had served on a committee but had failed to submit his accounts was excluded, and so were twelve specified classes of his relatives. Persons guilty of incest or of the first four of the five great sins, those who had stolen the property of others and those guilty of other specified forms of misconduct were likewise excluded, most of them for life. These conditions indicate that financial responsibility and administrative integrity were important considerations in the selection of committee members.[20]

Nevertheless, the eligibility requirements reveal the limitations of the system. Property ownership, residence and Vedic learning restricted access to public office. The Sabha described in these inscriptions was that of a Brahmin settlement, and its rules cannot be treated as representative of every village or social group in the Chola kingdom.[21]

The Kudavolai system was therefore a sophisticated example of local administrative organisation, but it was not an inclusive democratic system based on equal political participation.

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[19] Venkayya, *supra* note 2, at 142–43; Nilakanta Sastri, STUDIES IN COLA HISTORY AND ADMINISTRATION, *supra* note 16, at 149–51, 171.
[20] Venkayya, *supra* note 2, at 143–44; Nilakanta Sastri, STUDIES IN COLA HISTORY AND ADMINISTRATION, *supra* note 16, at 151–54, 172–73.
[21] Nilakanta Sastri, STUDIES IN COLA HISTORY AND ADMINISTRATION, *supra* note 16, at 115, 163–75.

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VIII. Ancient institutions and modern Indian democracy

The Constitution of India has established a political and legal framework fundamentally different from the institutions that existed in ancient India. Modern Indian democracy rests upon constitutional supremacy, equality before the law, representative government and universal adult suffrage.

Article 326 provides that elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage, subject to the qualifications and disqualifications laid down by the Constitution and by law. This principle represents a substantial departure from ancient systems in which participation was frequently restricted by clan membership, property ownership and social position.[22]

Similarly, the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 inserted Part IX into the Constitution and gave constitutional recognition to Panchayati Raj institutions. Article 243K vests the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to the Panchayats in the State Election Commission.[23]

At Uttaramerur the assembly, acting on a royal order and in the presence of the king's officer, laid down who could stand, who was barred for failing to render accounts or for misconduct, and how the draw was to be conducted in public before the whole assembly. Part IX of the Constitution now deals with the same matters: Article 243F governs disqualification from membership of a Panchayat, Article 243K entrusts the electoral rolls and the conduct of Panchayat elections to a State Election Commission, and under Article 243C(2) members are chosen by direct election rather than by lot.[24]

IX. Critical analysis

The historical evidence reveals that ancient India did not follow a single or continuous system of electoral governance. Different political arrangements existed in different regions and periods, depending upon the structure of society and the distribution of political authority.

The Vedic assemblies provide early evidence of collective political consultation, although their precise powers remain subject to historical interpretation. The Gana-Sanghas demonstrate the existence of non-monarchical political institutions, but participation was generally confined to

[22] India Const. art. 326.
[23] The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992; India Const. arts. 243–243O, 243K.
[24] Venkayya, *supra* note 2, at 142–45; Nilakanta Sastri, Studies in Cola History and Administration, *supra* note 16, at 147–48, 171–75; India Const. arts. 243C(2), 243F, 243K.

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particular ruling groups. Buddhist literature provides clearer evidence of organised voting procedures and majority-based dispute resolution.

The Mauryan and Gupta periods demonstrate the strengthening of monarchical and bureaucratic administration, while local institutions continued to perform important administrative functions. The Sangam Age similarly reveals the coexistence of hereditary kingship and local participation.

The strongest epigraphic evidence of structured local selection comes from the Chola period. The Uttaramerur inscriptions demonstrate that village administration involved prescribed qualifications, disqualifications, selection procedures and accountability requirements. The Kudavolai system therefore represents a significant example of institutionalised local governance, with certain limitations. The absence of universal suffrage distinguishes ancient political institutions from modern constitutional democracy.

This study consequently suggests that ancient Indian electoral practices should neither be dismissed as historically insignificant nor presented as equivalent to present-day democratic elections. Their study provides a deeper understanding of India's political history while highlighting the distinctive constitutional character of modern Indian democracy.

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