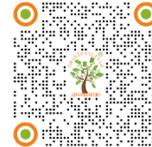


Original Article

## POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN INDIC TRADITION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JANAPADA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the nuances of political administration within the Indic tradition, specifically examining the Janapada, or ancient city-states, to shed light on the essence of statecraft in India. It challenges the overwhelmingly limited engagement with Western political theory when applied to Indian contexts, echoing Bhikhu Parekh's argument that contemporary non-Western societies have not successfully generated original political theory of their own. The analysis of Indian political thought presents a compelling case for embracing indigenous perspectives that intertwine ethical and spiritual dimensions, as illustrated by influential thinkers such as Kautilya and modern figures like Mahatma Gandhi. The paper outlines the evolution of statehood in ancient India, offering significant insights into governance and underscoring the critical role of cultural context in shaping political discourse. Ultimately, this study advocates for a transformative re-evaluation of Indian political theory that transcends the limitations of Western paradigms, aiming to uncover frameworks that resonate with India's unique socio-political realities.

**Keywords:** Janapada, State, Indian Knowledge System, Arthasastra, Kingship

### INTRODUCTION

The State plays a crucial role in governance and is a key factor in the political organisation of society. It manages government institutions and traditionally aims to maintain order and provide security by enforcing essential laws. It is founded on its territory (geography), a defined group of people (citizens), and sovereignty. The concept of the State inherently conveys authority and power. There is a deficit in Indian academia in deeply engaging with the classical notion of the Indian State, the state that dwells in the country's ancient philosophical tradition. The paper "The Poverty of Indian Political Theory," by Prof. Parekh (2010), argues that Western political theory is often ethnocentric, which limits its applicability in non-Western contexts. He has suggested that there is a disconnect between the state as defined and projected by Western democracies and the way the state has naturally developed in India's Ancient tradition. As Bhikhu Parekh (2010), 'no contemporary non-western society has produced much original theory'. Parekh attempted to understand and outline the nature of Indian political theory and suggested that it can be understood in the following ways: first, as the work of Indian writers and philosophers, regardless of whether they lived in India. Second, the theory itself is more important than the Indian political theorist. Third, there should be a culturally neutral approach to political theory.

According to Prof. Parekh, a political theory offers a coherent and systematic framework for understanding political life through three dimensions: the normative, the explanatory, and the conceptual. The normative dimension critically evaluates or legitimises political organisation and governance mechanisms. In contrast, the conceptual dimension involves delineating and analysing the

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foundational concepts that underlie political discourse and practices. On the other hand, the explanatory dimension elucidates the various elements that comprise political life, addressing their relative interrelations and dynamics. This dimension provides insight into how different components of the political landscape interact and influence one another [Meena \(2025\)](#).

Indian knowledge system or the Indic Studies is often regarded as comprehensive, addressing diverse issues, such as those articulated in the Manusmriti and other ancient text. These references encompass various domains, including economics, society, family, politics, and universalism. Kautilya, a prominent figure associated with the Danda School of thought, provided a detailed exploration of statecraft, governance, economics, ethics, and social responsibilities. In contrast, contemporary Indian political thinkers, such as Mahatma Gandhi, emphasise universal principles (*Ibid*).

Indian knowledge system has an ethical and spiritual foundation that advocates conciliation, harmonisation, assimilation, and cooperation. Scholars have made concerted efforts to address social issues and propose reforms aimed at fostering a just societal order. The socio-religious reform movements of the 19th century were primarily focused on cultural reformation and the elimination of sociocultural injustices. Furthermore, they demonstrate a strong understanding of administrative matters within the state and governance. Scholars ranging from Manu and Vedavyasa to Kautilya, Barani, and Abul Fazl have contributed significantly to the knowledge regarding administration in their respective eras.

## THE STATE IN INDIC TRADITION

Based on the historiographic research, accounts of foreign travellers, texts discovered during the 19th and 20th centuries as part of the Nationalist project, and early writings by Indian scholars from the 1940s to the 1980s, one can attempt to understand the statecraft in Ancient India (*Ibid*). However, the origins of Indian cultural civilisation remain debatable, with some nationalist scholars claiming that the Indian State dates back millions of years before Christ. Conversely, scholars like A.C. Das argue that we can trace ancient Indian civilisation back about 25,000 years. However, archaeological evidence suggests that Indian culture dates back to around 4,000 B.C. [Marshall \(1973\)](#).

The archaeological findings at Harappā and Mohenjodaro indicate the existence of an advanced urban civilisation in ancient India, which engaged in cultural and economic exchanges with societies like Egypt and Sumer. The timeline for the emergence of the Aryan civilisation in India is still debated among scholars. The origins of the Aryans are thought to be in Central Asia, northern India, and possibly Tibet, with some theories suggesting connections to regions as distant as Russia or Austria [Meena \(2025\)](#). Many scholars trace Aryan roots back to the Second Millennium B.C., based on evidence of interactions with the indigenous Indo-Aryans (*Dasyus*) [Varma \(1974\)](#). Importantly, as [Altekar \(2005\)](#) highlights, there is a noticeable absence of systematic literature on political science from this early era. The ages of the Vedas and Brahmanas are documented within Vedic literature itself. While sources from the Rigveda may be limited, the Atharvaveda offers a broader narrative, primarily addressing the institutions of kingship [Altekar \(2005\)](#). The Samhitās of the Yajurveda frequently discuss the elaborate coronation rites, emphasising that the king engaged in various sacrificial practices.

Prof. M.P. [Singh \(2019\)](#) has presented the two theories of the state from the post-vedic eras, one that can be traced from the Mahabharata and the other from post-buddha text such as the Digha Nikaya. Geographically, the Mahabharata is associated with the upper Ganga valley area, whereas the Digha Nikaya pertains to regions typically located north of the mid-Ganga valley, extending into and along the sub-Himalayan landscape all the way to the far northwest corner of the Indian subcontinent.

The central political institution for the Indo-Aryans was known as 'Kingship', and it served as the foundational core of polity and society. It was charged with upholding the moral order, called 'Dharma.' In this context, Kingship is often viewed as synonymous with the state. Unlike the liberal conception of the state, which emphasises the roles of the executive, legislature, and law, ancient Indian political thought identifies the king as the ultimate source of law, executive authority, and society's moral compass.

The authority of a king extended over one or several 'Rashtras,' or regions. Historical texts point to the Vedic king possessing charismatic qualities, suggesting that the Vedic Rashtra cannot be equated with the modern understanding of the state. The Rashtra was formed by uniting various 'Kulas'—or families—while the people or tribes were referred to as 'Visah,' with other terms including 'Janah' for a clan. A Rashtra encompassed three demographic elements: families, tribes, and clans, with multiple Gramas (villages) collectively constituting one Rashtra [Meena \(2025\)](#).

Classic Indic theories often attribute divine origins to Kingship, portraying the king as dignified, assertive, and respected, akin to the notable Vedic gods Indra and Varuna. However, there were two significant limitations on royal power.

Firstly, Kingship may have been elective, but it remains unclear whether the entire populace or a select group of nobles made the selection. Hymns in the Atharvaveda and Rigveda support this notion, though scholars such as [Zimmer \(1879\)](#) argue that the Vedic monarchy was primarily hereditary. Conversely, Geldner argues that references in the Vedas imply that the subjects had to accept the king. In his examination of Hindu polity, [Jayaswal \(2005\)](#) equates the term Rashtra with the state. However, many scholars dispute this, arguing that the concept of state is a legalistic term that emerged in 16th-century Italy following significant legal and political transformations.

Secondly, the Vedic Rashtra was likely not a fully mature political institution by 15th-century B.C. References in the Aitareya Brahmana describe Rashtra as a realm or dominion, or 'Kshatra,' while in the Taittiriya Samhitā, it is interpreted as the people. In his Arthashastra, Kautilya identified four elements: forts, the Rashtra, the King, and the Kingdom (Rajya). This suggests that he may have viewed Rashtra as the countryside or the land's subjects.

While a robust theoretical conception of the state may not have existed in ancient India, the idea of the state itself was undoubtedly present in Indic traditions. Western political thinker Hegel dismissed the notion of a state in India, arguing that concepts such as 'abstract will' and 'subjective freedom' were absent in ancient Indian thought. He famously remarked, "Hindu political existence presents us with a people but no state" Hegel (1899). Scholars like Oursel et al. (1934) suggest that India's vastness and diversity hindered the formation of a coherent state. Cox (1948), in his work on caste, class, and race, described Hindu society as an aggregation of small, autonomous communities united by mutual interdependence, labelling it a 'society without an organised state.'

These claims are easily countered by examining Ashoka's extensive empire, his effective territorial management, and the organisational prowess of his regime. A state can be identified through an organised population, a defined territory, and a governing authority. Historical evidence attests to the presence of numerous such empires in ancient India, directly challenging Western thinkers' claims of the nonexistence of a state in ancient India.

The king's political power was notably limited by two key institutions: the 'Sabha' and the 'Samiti.' In his work, Hindu Polity, Jayaswal delves into these concepts in detail, particularly in the second and third chapters. He explains that the term 'Samiti' derives from the words Sam+iti, which means 'meeting together.' This term encompasses a national assembly that represents the entire people or Visah, primarily tasked with the election and re-election of the king (Rajan), making this function of the Samiti particularly significant. Both institutions were recognised as constitutional sovereign bodies, and it was essential for the king to appear before the Samiti. Jayaswal (2005) cites the Chhandogya Upanishad, noting Svetaketu Aruneya Gautama's visit to the Samiti of the Panchalas, highlighting its historical importance. He argues that the Samitis emerged from developments during the later Vedic age, serving as forums for unrestricted discussion and debate.

Conversely, the 'Sabha' also functioned as a constitutional entity. Both the Samiti and its sister institution were seen as daughters of the Prajapati. The Sabha, referred to as 'narishtā,' meaning 'resolution of many,' was a collective body formed for cooperation, with commitments that were meant to be unbreakable. The literal translation of Sabha refers to a collective of individuals who shine together. Furthermore, these gatherings included notable members of society—individuals held in high regard—who convened under the leadership of a Sabhā-pati. While Zimmer likened the Sabhas to village councils, Ludwig posited that they did not include the entire populace, as only Brahmins and wealthy individuals were typically allowed to participate. On the other hand, Macdonell argued against differentiation between the Sabha and the Samiti. In addition to these two notable institutions, references to another assembly known as 'Vidatha' can also be found in Vedic texts. Vidathas served as gatherings for various purposes, including secular, religious, or military. Roth described them as an order or a governing body, while Jayaswal considered Vidatha, the foundational folk assembly from which the Samiti, Sabha, and Sena evolved. The political insights provided by the three major Brahmanas—the Satapatha, Aitareya, and Taittiriya—also provide valuable context for the development of state institutions in ancient India.

## THE JANPADAS

Indologists have undertaken extensive efforts to present sequential interpretations of ancient Indian political history. Given the near-total absence of chronological data in the modern technical sense, their focus has often been on significant historical trends and events. However, from a political standpoint, these studies have insufficiently addressed the evolution of statehood and statecraft in ancient India.

While scholars such as Manu and Kautilya are recognised for their insightful treatises, exploring the foundational principles that underpin their works and inspire them is essential. A careful examination of ancient Indian literature about the evolution of statehood indicates that, prior to the emergence of the Mauryan Empire, India was characterised by numerous small states, each differing in size, population, and customs. These small states evolved from mobile groups of people who spoke a range of dialects and practised a variety of religious practices. Thus, politically speaking, the transition from a tribal polity to a system of small states ultimately paved the way for the imperial polity of the Mauryas (Mishra, 1973, p.7).

The concept of 'Janapadas' emerges prominently in later Vedic literature and continues to be highlighted in Purāṇic texts and the iconic epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Ancient Buddhist and Jain literature also mentions the significance of Janapadas. These sources illuminate the rich tapestry (Art Form) of social, political, religious, and intellectual life and provide invaluable insights into their geographical contexts. Understanding the Janapadas is essential for grasping the complexities of early Indian civilisation.

The earlier Vedic literature, particularly the Samhitā of the Rgveda and the Atharvaveda, frequently mentions various 'Janas' or tribes, providing lively descriptions of their lives, habits, and warfare. Buddhist and Jain literature explicitly refers to India's sixteen Mahājanapadas, or great Janapada states. A critical study of the earlier Vedic texts alongside the vast corpus of ancient Indian literature reveals that the political history of Pre-Mauryan India was characterised by numerous small states, known as Janapada states. The formation of Janapadas was a gradual and dynamic process. Later Vedic literature sheds light on the political conditions

of northern India around the tenth century BCE, mentioning Janapadas such as Videha, Gandhara, Kekaya, Madra, Utkala, Matsya, Kuru, Panchala, Kaikeya, and Kosala. The Puranas, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata also refer to a much larger number of Janapadas. On the other hand, the Buddhist canonical literature primarily discusses the sixteen great Janapadas: Kashi, Kosala, Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Malla, Ghetiya, Vamsha, Kuru, Panchala, Machchha, Suresena, Assaka, Avanti, Gandhara, and Kamboja. Similarly, the Bhagavati Sutra in Jain literature also mentions sixteen important Janapadas, although the names differ significantly from those found in Buddhist sources [Mishra \(1973\)](#).

Regarding the nature of Janapadas, it was believed that people who lived in Janapada had common ancestry and faith. Most of these Janapadas have a pastoral economy and possess distinct dialects.

## VARIOUS REFERENCES AND MODELS OF JANAPADAS

### 1) The Arthashastra references

The first Prakarana of the second book of the Arthashastra discusses the settlement of Janapadas (Janapadanivesa). This involves bringing people to settle in existing Janapadas or creating new Janapadas from either within the kingdom (Apavahana) or from outside regions (Abhishyandavamana) [Muralidharan \(1979\)](#). Groups of villages were organised into Janapadas, with sizes of 10, 200, 400, or 800 villages. The capital, the Sthaniya, was in the centre of the 800-village group. The Dronamukha served as the capital for the 400-village groups, the Kharvatika for the 200-village groups, and the Samgrahana for the 10-village groups. Forts were to be constructed along the borders of the Janapadas, and the areas between them were intended for outcastes and forest tribes such as the Vagurikas, Sabaras, Pulindas, Chandalas, and Vanacharas. Additionally, detailed policies for administering the villages were prescribed.

Considerable incentives were provided to the settlers. The Brahmins received land as Brahmadeya, free from Danda and Kara (taxes). Officials such as Adhyaksha, Samkhyayika, Gopa Sthanika, Anikshika, Chikitsalka, Aswadamaka, and Jamgharika were also granted land that could not be sold or mortgaged. The rights of those exempt from taxes were hereditary, while those who paid taxes enjoyed them only during their lifetimes.

Individuals who reclaimed wasteland could not be evicted. In contrast, those who left land fallow were subject to eviction, and the land would be allocated to "Gramabratakas" and "Vaidehikas." Those who reclaimed land were to be protected (Anugraha) and provided with loans (Parihara). However, the king was to limit loans to an amount that would not harm the treasury (Kosa), as excessive loans could harm the settlers. Loans were given in the form of grain, cattle, and gold and were to be repaid. Settlers who repaid their loans would be granted protection. The King must engage in welfare and developmental activities, such as constructing Dams, roads, and water resources for society. The king is supposed to own the income generated by the natural resources in the Janapadas. The king was responsible for overseeing the settlers' personal morality and family relationships to ensure the efficient functioning of these production centres.

### 2) The references from the Asokan edicts

The 13th rock edict of Asoka mentions the deportation of 150,000 men. Prof. Kosambi has pointed out that the verb "Apavah," used in the edicts, is the same term employed by Kautilya. In several edicts, Asoka urges his subjects to obey their fathers and mothers and be generous to friends, acquaintances, and relatives. In this regard, Asoka fulfilled the role assigned to him by Kautilya in regulating personal relationships among the people of the Janapadas [Kosambi \(1956\)](#). The functioning of the Janapadas reveals multiple instances where Asokan practices closely align with Kautilyan principles. For example, Asoka's governor in Saurashtra initiated the construction of canals fed by the Sudarsana dam, initially built by Chandragupta Maurya. Additionally, the development of roads and the strategic digging of wells at regular intervals further illustrate this convergence.

The theoretical framework developed by Kautilya concerning the settlement of new lands is echoed in the Asokan edicts. These edicts reinforce the importance of state authority and meticulous regulation over these settlements, highlighting the state's pivotal role in maintaining control and order.

## SUMMING UP

In conclusion, this paper emphasizes the rich and nuanced landscape of political administration within the Indic tradition, particularly through the lens of Janapada. It highlights the necessity of recognizing and incorporating indigenous frameworks that reflect India's unique socio-political realities, moving beyond the constraints imposed by conventional Western political theory. The conclusions of this study advocate a transformative re-evaluation of Indian political theory, urging scholars and practitioners to cultivate a political discourse that resonates with the complexities of contemporary Indian society. This recontextualization not only honours the historical richness of Indian thought but also encourages a more inclusive approach to political theory, thereby enriching the global understanding of statecraft and governance. Ultimately, embracing these indigenous perspectives can lead to a more comprehensive and effective response to the challenges faced by modern India, ensuring that the state continues to play a vital role in promoting justice, order, and communal harmony.

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