Tracing India's Democratic Legacy & Politics Behind the Claim

Mains: *GS - I – History & GS-II - Polity & Governance*

Why in news?

India has often claimed that it is the world's oldest democracy, and in its strongest form, it is "the mother of democracy." On Constitution Day, it is worth examining the historical basis of this claim, its importance, merits, and consequences.

What exactly is 'rule of the people'?

- **Meaning** – Democracy means ***rule of the people***.
- **Important questions raised** – Who are the "people"? What is to be "ruled"? And how is the "rule of the people" over "what" is ruled going to be realised?
- **Democracy in the modern world** – In countries like India, the "people" refers to all citizens of the nation.
- Governance is carried out through elected representatives, whose authority comes from the people's mandate expressed through elections.
- **Role of Universal Adult Suffrage** – Modern democracies are based on universal adult suffrage, which gives all adult citizens the right to vote and participate in choosing their representatives.
- **Modern democracy took shape gradually** – The democratic system we know today evolved over several centuries -
    - The nation-state emerged in the 17th century.
    - Representative government through elections became central from the late 18th century, especially after American independence.
    - Universal adult voting rights became widespread only in the 20th century.
- **Ancient idea with modern features** – Although the institutions and practices of modern democracy are relatively recent, the underlying idea of people participating in governance has ancient roots and predates the modern era.

How did the idea of Democracy originate?

- **Democracy's origin** – The term democracy is derived from the Greek word demokratia, a term used from the middle of the 5th century BCE to denote the political systems in some Greek city-states, of which Athens was the prime example.
- **Athens, an early model of Democracy** – Athenian democracy shared some features with modern democracies but was not identical.
- Political participation was limited mainly to male citizens above 18 years of age.

- **Assembly & the Council of Five Hundred** – The Assembly, which included eligible male citizens, debated and made decisions.
- Its agenda was prepared by the Council of Five Hundred, which played a key role in administering public affairs.
- **Selection by Lottery, Not Elections** – Members of the Council were chosen through a lottery system rather than by voting. Representatives were selected from Athens' 139 local divisions, known as demes.
- **Decision-making** – In the Assembly, citizens voted by raising their hands, and decisions were based on the majority view of those present and participating.
- **Courts as a check on political power** – The Assembly's authority was balanced by the Dikasteria (people's courts). Jurors, selected by lottery from citizens aged over 30, helped oversee and limit political power.
- **End of Athenian Democracy** – Athenian demokratia was snuffed out when Athens got conquered, first by Macedonia and then by the Romans in 146 BCE.

Why India's claim of being the world's oldest democracy matters?

- **Not a linear journey** – The history of democracy is far too complicated to be traced in a straight line from Athens to America and then beyond.
- **Influence of Athenian Democracy** – Nevertheless, there is no doubt that democracy in the West, that is, in the United States and Northern Europe, was inspired, informed, and often legitimised by the Athenian example.
- This was part and parcel of the heritage of the so-called European renaissance.
- **Democracy & colonial narrative** – In the context of colonialism and India, the linking of democracy with Western civilisation has also served to convey the impression that Indian democracy was a gift of colonial modernity.
- In other words, the success of Indian democracy is in some ways a success of the British Empire's "civilising mission."
- **Significance of the claim** – The assertion that India is the "mother of democracy" challenges the idea that democracy was merely a Western import.
- It argues that India possesses its own democratic traditions and historical foundations.
- **Alternative vision of India's democratic evolution** – Supporters of the claim contend that India could have developed into a modern democracy through its own historical and political traditions, even without Western intervention.

What is the basis of India's claim to democratic origins?

- **Source of the claim** – The claim that India is the world's oldest democracy comes from the quite remarkable existence and persistence of various gana-sanghas in northern and western South Asia from about ***600 BCE onwards until the mid-first millennium CE***.

Gana-sangha

- **Meaning** – As Romila Thapar has explained, the terms ***gana-sangha or gana-rajya*** have the "connotation of gana, referring to those who claim to be of equal status, and sangha meaning an assembly, or rajya, referring to governance."
- **Location** – In early South Asia, the gana-sanghas occupied the periphery of the

kingdoms concentrated in the Gangetic Plains.
- They could also be found in the terai region and in the foothills of the Himalaya, in north-west India, Punjab, Sindh, and in central and western India.
- **Major Gana-Sanghas** – According to Buddhist sources, which are prime sources for learning about gana- sanghas, prominent gana-sanghas included Vajji and Malla, which were mahajanpadas or confederations of clans; as well as the Sakyas, Koliyas, Bulis, Kalamas, Moriyas, and Bhaggas, to name a few.
- **Governance** – These gana-sanghas were governed by an assembly that comprised the heads of families belonging to a clan or clan chiefs in a confederacy, of which they alone were members.

How did the assembly function?

- **Assembly-based governance** – Each gana-sangha had an assembly located in its main city.
- The assembly was led by a chief, sometimes called a Raja, but the position was generally not hereditary.
- **Decisions through discussion and voting** – Public matters were brought before the assembly for debate.
- Decisions were ideally made through consensus, but when agreement could not be reached, members voted to decide the outcome.
- **Administrative & military support** – The Raja was assisted by officials such as advisors, a treasurer, and a military commander, helping manage administration, finances, and defence.
- **Advanced Judicial System** – The gana-sanghas maintained a structured judicial process.
- Individuals accused of offences could be tried through a hierarchy of seven levels of officials, indicating a well-developed legal system.
- **Centres of Intellectual Freedom** – Compared with contemporary kingdoms, the gana-sanghas appear to have been more open to individual expression and unconventional ideas.
- Notably, both Mahavira and Gautama Buddha were raised in such political environments.
- **Nationalist interpretation of the Gana-Sanghas** – The argument that the gana-sanghas make India the world's oldest democracy was strongly promoted by nationalist historians during the late colonial period, who highlighted these ancient republics as examples of indigenous democratic traditions.
- **Legacy in Modern India** – The official Hindi and Sanskrit name of the ***Republic of India is "Bharatiya Ganrajya" (Republic of India)***.
- This reflects the view that modern India is an inheritor of the ancient gana-sangha tradition of collective self-governance.

How democratic were gana-sanghas?

- **Gana-sanghas are not modern democracies** – Gana-sanghas cannot be called democracies by modern standards, but the same is true of ancient Athens; neither system provided equal political rights to all citizens.

- **Gana-Sanghas similar to early democracies** – If Athenian democracy is regarded as an early form of democracy, gana-sanghas may deserve similar recognition because both systems shared key democratic features despite their limitations.
- **Key similarities** –
    - Both had assemblies where members debated issues and voted on decisions.
    - In both systems, majority opinion determined outcomes.
    - Each also had mechanisms for administering justice and resolving disputes.
- **Limitation** – Both excluded from their ambit a large number of people, as "democracy" was limited to adult males or heads of clans.
- **Key differences in governance** – The Athenian system had a more elaborate governing mechanism that required greater involvement of adult males in government, whereas Gana-sanghas had comparatively simpler governing structures.
- **Difference of degree, not nature** – The distinction between the two systems appears to be one of scale and complexity rather than a completely different form of government.
- Fundamentally, both relied on collective decision-making through assemblies.
- **Gana sangha's appearance** – Gana sanghas may have actually appeared to be ***slightly earlier, from around 600 BCE***, than Athenian/ancient Greek versions, which appeared around 500 BCE.

Does this make India the world's oldest democracy?

- **Gana sanghas do not make India the 'Mother of Democracy'** – The existence of gana-sanghas challenges the idea that democracy originated only in the West.
- However, their presence alone does not prove that India is the world's oldest democracy or the "mother of democracy."
- **Already existed democratic practices** – Forms of government that are based on collective deliberation involving most members of a community can and have appeared across the world even before the 6th century BCE.
- **Democracy may predate settled civilisations** – In fact, scholars have argued that prior to the advent of agriculture, when human beings started to settle in fixed communities, hunting and gathering societies were more likely to have governed themselves by some principles of democracy.
- **No evidence of global influence** – There is little historical evidence to suggest that democratic traditions elsewhere, including ancient Greek democracy, were influenced by the Indian gana-sanghas.
- **Limits of the 'Oldest Democracy' claim** – The ancient gana-sanghas existed long before the emergence of modern India and did not view themselves as part of a unified Indian nation.
- Therefore, linking them directly to present-day India can be historically problematic.

Conclusion:

- Just as it may be an oversimplification to describe Athens or the ancient Greek city-states as the sole birthplace of democracy, it is equally difficult to describe India as the world's oldest democracy or the exclusive "mother of democracy."
- Democracy evolved through diverse traditions across different societies.

Reference

Indian Express | Is India the mother of democracy?

