
ANCIENT ROOTS OF FEDERALISM IN INDIAN POLITY: A CONSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION: DECONSTRUCTING THE “BORROWED” MYTH

Whenever the topic of federalism comes up in our political science lectures, the default instinct is to picture modern Western constitutions. It has become almost a cliché to hear critics argue that the Indian Constitution is simply a massive copy-paste job—a “bag of borrowings” or just a lingering shadow of British colonial administration. But honestly, when you look past the modern legal jargon and engage seriously with our own political history, that narrative begins to fall apart.

Our Constitution acts as the vital pulse of our polity, distributing power carefully between the Union and the States. While this structural architecture looks distinctly modern on paper, the underlying impulse behind it—decentralisation, participation, and power-sharing is deeply and authentically Indian. Walking through the crowded, diverse lanes of Munirka on the way to college, you quickly realise that a single, highly centralised government could never realistically manage the daily friction and overlap of such a pluralistic society. Power simply has to be shared.

Long before the Constituent Assembly sat down to deliberate in 1946, the Indian subcontinent already from small village assem-

-lies managing local disputes to large confederate republics debating matters of war and peace, governance here was never really a one-man show. This article traces that indigenous journey. It argues that Indian federalism isn't an imported concept, but rather a continuation of our deeply rooted political traditions.

MORE THAN JUST KINGS AND EMPIRES

When we study Indian history, it can often feel like an endless, repetitive procession of kings, conquests, and dynastic shifts. But ancient India was never a single, monolithically controlled state. It was a vast landscape of kingdoms, republics, guilds, and local councils, all operating simultaneously and often quite independently. Because India has always been so linguistically and culturally diverse, concentrating all power at a single centre was never truly practical. Governance had to be negotiated. Decisions were routinely made through custom, dharma, and local consensus rather than through absolute top-down command.

When leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru drafted the Constitution, they were acutely aware of this. Decentralisation wasn't some alien concept they had to force onto the people; it was a native political instinct.

FEDERALISM IN ANCIENT INDIA



I. THE EARLY REPUBLICS: THE VAJJIAN MODEL

Let's go back to the period of the Mahajanapadas (roughly the 6th to 4th century BCE). A detail that rarely gets enough attention in standard school textbooks is that not all of these ancient states were monarchies. Several of them actually functioned as oligarchic republics or confederacies, where power was shared among elected representatives through deliberative assemblies.

The Vajjian Confederacy is perhaps the most striking example. It functioned as a republic where authority was distributed among a council rather than concentrated in a single ruler.

The Licchavis, one of the constituent clans within this confederacy, held their intense political deliberations in a council hall called the Santhagara. Here, elected members debated everything from local justice to matters of war and diplomacy.

Even Gautama Buddha praised the Vajjian system for its political cohesion and democratic functioning. These confederate republics are hard evidence that the idea of shared sovereignty was born right here on our soil.

II. SABHA AND SAMITI: THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

If you dive into ancient Vedic texts like the Rigveda and the Atharvaveda, you will repeatedly encounter two vital institutions: the Sabha and the Samiti. They weren't just symbolic gatherings.

The Sabha was typically a smaller, exclusive deliberative council composed of elders who advised on serious political matters. The Samiti, by contrast, was a much larger popular assembly open to broader public participation. Together, they functioned as a highly meaningful check on royal power, establishing the principle that a king's authority was never absolute. Political scientist A.S. Altekar observed that these assemblies institutionalised the idea that sovereignty doesn't belong exclusively to the ruler, but is shared with the entire community. The historical line connecting the ancient Samiti to our modern Sansad might be long, but it is surprisingly direct.

III GRASSROOTS FEDERALISM: THE CHOLA INSCRIPTIONS

Sometimes the most compelling historical evidence is carved literally into stone. If you want concrete proof of how effectively ancient Indians managed local self-government, look no further than the Uttaramerur inscriptions from Tamil Nadu, dating back to the Chola king Parantaka I (907–955 CE).

These stone inscriptions describe a comprehensively organised system of village self-government in extraordinary detail. They specify exactly how ward committees should be constituted, the rigorous qualifications required to stand for local office, and the precise grounds on which a member could be disqualified for corruption. Representatives were selected using a highly transparent lottery system called kudavolai.

The system even enforced strict term limits and cooling-off periods for disqualified members. This was a fully functioning, constitutionally articulated framework for local democratic governance, operating more than a thousand years before our modern Constitution was adopted.

IV. KAUTILYA'S BLUEPRINT FOR DECENTRALISED ADMINISTRATION

Reading Kautilya's Arthashastra—written around the 4th century BCE—gives you a perspective on public administration that feels strikingly contemporary. Through his Saptanga theory (the seven elements of the state), Kautilya clearly recognised that a vast territory (Janapada) simply could not be micro-managed directly from the capital.

To solve this, he recommended dividing the territory into carefully calibrated administrative units: the Grama (village), Samgrahana (10 villages), Kharvatika (200 villages), Dronamukha (400 villages), and the Sthaniya (800 villages). Each unit had its own designated officers with specific functions and accountability. This tiered structure is a textbook application of the modern federal principle of “subsidiarity”—the idea that decisions should be made at the lowest level of governance capable of handling them. Kautilya also explicitly advised rulers to respect the existing customs and laws of different regions. He understood that forcing uniformity across a diverse empire would only lead to instability.

THE MEDIEVAL BRIDGE: IQTAS AND SUBAHS

When we move into the medieval period, we usually associate it with the extreme centralising ambitions of the Delhi Sultans and the Mughal Emperors. However, the logistical reality of governing the Indian subcontinent still forced these rulers to adopt significantly decentralised structures.

V. THE DELHI SULTANATE AND THE IQTA SYSTEM

The Delhi Sultanate relied heavily on the Iqta system. Military commanders known as Iqtadars were granted revenue assignments over defined territories, within which they exercised administrative, judicial, and military authority. They were, in effect, regional governors with delegated sovereign powers.

VI. THE MUGHAL EMPIRE: LAYERED ADMINISTRATION AND CHECKS ON POWER

The Mughal Empire under Akbar perfected this multi-layered administration. The empire was brilliantly organised into Subahs (provinces), subdivided into Sarkars (districts) and Parganas.

What is particularly interesting from a federalism perspective is that Akbar deliberately separated the provincial revenue authority from the executive authority. The provincial finance officer (Diwan) reported directly to the imperial Diwan in Delhi, completely bypassing the provincial governor (Subedar).

This deliberate structural check prevented any single official from accumulating too much authority—a fascinating precursor to modern institutional checks and balances.

VII. REGIONAL KINGDOMS AND THE ENDURING PANCHAYAT

Through all changes in kings and empires, one institution remained remarkably constant: the village Panchayat. Local communities continued to resolve disputes, manage shared resources, and govern their own immediate affairs with a degree of independence from whatever was happening in the imperial capital.

The Maratha confederacy, by the 18th century, evolved into a genuinely federal structure.

The Peshwa exercised central authority, but the great Maratha chiefs governed their respective territories with substantial autonomy, coordinating on matters of common concern such as war and diplomacy.

TRANSITION TO MODERN FEDERALISM

During British colonial rule, governance became highly centralised, especially after the Charter Act of 1833. The British treated India as a unitary estate to be administered. However, over time, reforms like the Government of India Act of 1935 introduced elements of decentralisation and provincial autonomy.

After independence, India officially adopted a federal system through its Constitution in 1950. The result is a unique constitutional system—often described as “quasi-federal”—where the Centre remains strong to ensure national unity, but the States possess significant, constitutionally guaranteed legislative and financial powers.

CONTINUITY AND CONCLUSION: THE POETRY OF OUR REPUBLIC

So why does this deep history matter to a Political Science student today? It matters because it fundamentally changes how we understand our own Constitution.

When we recognise that the federal spirit of our republic has roots stretching back through the Chola village assemblies, Kautilya’s administrative hierarchy, and the Vajjian confederacy, we can no longer dismiss our Constitution as a colonial hangover. Its federal architecture isn’t borrowed; it is remembered. Modern institutions like the Panchayati Raj—enshrined through the 73rd and 74th

Amendments—directly reflect these ancient local assemblies. Institutions like the GST Council and the Inter-State Council echo the collaborative alliances of our past.

Our Constitution is not just a rigid, dry legal manual. It has its own unique rhythm, almost like a deeply thoughtful shayari or poem—it beautifully balances the strict meter of central authority with the free-flowing rhyme of local autonomy.

From Kautilya’s Janapada to today’s Digital Sansad, the journey of Indian federalism is long, but it is completely unbroken. Our Constitution works precisely because it doesn’t try to flatten India’s extraordinary diversity into a single uniform mould.

It respects differences while holding us together. That is the truest meaning of the Constitution serving as the pulse of our polity.

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