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From Sabha to Parliament: Continuities in Indian Political Practices – An Indian Knowledge System Perspective

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Abstract

This review article explores the enduring threads of democratic governance from ancient Indian Sabhas and Samitis to the modern Parliament, viewed through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). It highlights continuities in participatory decision-making, consensus-building, and representation, drawing on Vedic texts, epics, and constitutional frameworks. By bridging indigenous traditions with contemporary practices, the article underscores how IKS enriches India's parliamentary democracy, offering insights for sustainable political evolution.

Keywords: Sabha, Samiti, Parliament, Indian Knowledge Systems, democratic continuity

Introduction

Ancient India nurtured proto-democratic institutions like the Sabha—a council of elders tasked with deliberation and counsel—and the Samiti—a broader popular assembly responsible for electing kings, ratifying decisions, and voicing the public will. These venerable bodies find their roots deep in Vedic literature, particularly the Rigveda, where hymns such as those in Mandala 10 extol the virtues of collective assemblies fostering harmony and justice. The Sabha functioned as an exclusive forum of wise elders, akin to a senate, where nuanced debates shaped policy and held rulers accountable through scrutiny and veto powers. In contrast, the Samiti represented the tribal populace, embodying a more inclusive ethos where common voices could sway royal appointments or declarations of war, underscoring an early form of participatory sovereignty.

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These institutions emphasized rigorous debate (sabda or vak), accountability to dharma (cosmic order), and collective wisdom (samvid), principles vividly echoed in later epics and treatises. The Mahabharata, for instance, portrays the Kuru Sabha during the epic's central narrative, where elders like Bhishma and Vidura engage in moral deliberations on governance, warfare ethics, and statecraft, mirroring real republican traditions in ancient janapadas (tribal states). Similarly, Kautilya's Arthashastra meticulously describes village republics known as Gram Sabhas, self-governing bodies in the Mauryan and post-Mauryan eras that managed local justice, taxation, and resource allocation through consensus rather than autocracy. Texts like the Brahmanas and Upanishads further glorify these assemblies as embodiments of rita (universal truth), where the king's authority derived legitimacy not from divine right alone but from public ratification—a radical departure from contemporaneous monarchies in Persia or Egypt.

This indigenous democratic DNA persisted through medieval guilds (shrenis) and bhakti-driven public discourses, surviving Islamic and colonial interruptions. The transition to the modern Parliament under India's 1950 Constitution, while ostensibly adopting Westminster elements like bicameralism and question hours, retained profound indigenous flavors. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and other framers consciously invoked Sabha-Samiti parallels during Constituent Assembly debates, positioning the Lok Sabha as the people's Samiti and the Rajya Sabha as the deliberative Sabha of statesmen. The parliamentary oath to uphold the Constitution echoes Vedic ratni (jewel of the realm), where sovereignty vests in "We the People," aligning seamlessly with IKS's holistic view of governance as dharma-driven rajya (statecraft).

This continuity is no accident but a reflection of India's civilizational ethos—svadharma (self-rooted duty) over slavish Western import. Unlike Europe's feudal-to-liberal rupture, India's polity evolved organically: from Vedic ganas (republics) documented by Greek traveler Megasthenes, through Chola sabhas managing temple economies, to Gandhi's Gram Swaraj vision influencing Panchayati Raj. IKS reframes Parliament not as a colonial residue but as a renaissance of purva-paksha (ancient precedent), where debate fosters nyaya (justice) amid diversity. In an era of populist disruptions, reclaiming these threads—consensus over confrontation, wisdom over whim—offers a timeless antidote, proving India's democracy as eternal sabha-spirit reborn

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Methodology

This review article adopts a qualitative synthesis of historical, textual, and comparative analysis, methodologies deeply embedded in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) research paradigms. These approaches prioritize pramana (epistemic validity) through shruti (Vedic revelation), smriti (remembered tradition), and yukti (logical inference), eschewing positivist empiricism for holistic interpretation suited to civilizational studies.

Primary sources form the bedrock: Vedic Samhitas like the Rigveda and Atharvaveda, which hymnically describe Sabha-Samiti functions; Smritis such as Manusmriti and Yajnavalkya Smriti, outlining sabha procedures and rajadharma; Itihasas including the Mahabharata's Sabha Parva and Ramayana's descriptions of tribal assemblies; and Kautilya's Arthashastra, detailing gram sabhas and shreni governance. These are meticulously cross-referenced with colonial ethnographies (e.g., British gazetteers on Licchavi republics), Megasthenes' Indica, and Constituent Assembly Debates (1946-49), where framers like Ambedkar invoked indigenous precedents.

Secondary literature—drawn from peer-reviewed journals like the Indian Journal of History of Science, IKS-focused outlets such as those from IITs' IKS cells, and political science reviews—was subjected to thematic analysis. Key motifs of continuity in representation (jana to Lok Sabha), debate (vak to Question Hour), and sovereignty (ratni to Preamble's "We the People") emerged through NVivo-like coding adapted for Sanskrit texts.

No empirical data collection, such as surveys or fieldwork, was undertaken, aligning with IKS's non-quantitative ethos. Instead, a hermeneutic interpretation—purva mimamsa-inspired exegesis—bridges ancient pramanas with modern parliamentary procedures, revealing dharma as the unbroken thread. This method ensures cultural authenticity, fostering svadeshi scholarship over derivative Western lenses.

Discussion

Institutional Parallels

The Sabha's role as a deliberative body mirrors the Rajya Sabha's function in reviewing legislation, both prioritizing elder wisdom and consensus over majority tyranny. Similarly, the Lok Sabha embodies the Samiti's popular sovereignty, where elected representatives debate as in ancient tribal assemblies. Village panchayats,

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surviving from Mauryan times, prefigure federalism in India's Lok Sabha-Rajya Sabha bicameralism.

Practices of Debate and Accountability

edic Sabhas used sabda (word/debate) for policy, akin to Question Hour and Zero Hour in Parliament, ensuring executive answerability—a dharma-centric check against adharma (unrighteousness). Kautilya's emphasis on rajasabha consultations parallels parliamentary committees, fostering nyaya (justice) through deliberation.

IKS Contributions to Modernity

IKS views polity as raja-dharma (righteous rule), evident in Parliament's oath to the Constitution, echoing Vedic ratni (people's ratification of kings). Challenges like disruptions highlight a drift from sabha-like amity, suggesting IKS revival via yoga of ancient ethics with democratic tools.

Aspect	Ancient Sabha/Samiti	Modern Parliament	IKS Continuity
Representation	Elders & tribespeople	Elected MPs (Lok/Rajya Sabha)	Popular sovereignty
Decision-Making	Consensus via debate	Bills, motions, voting	Dharma-guided deliberation
Accountability	King elective/removable	No-confidence motions	Collective wisdom
Scope	Local/tribal to royal	National/federal	Holistic rajya

Conclusion

Continuities from Sabha to Parliament affirm India's democratic genius as profoundly indigenous, not a borrowed Western artifact but a living evolution enriched by Indian

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Knowledge Systems' (IKS) emphasis on sadharana dharma—the universal ethics binding ruler and ruled in mutual accountability. Ancient assemblies embodied this through consensus-driven deliberation, where vak (speech) ensured nyaya (justice) over mere majoritarianism, a principle mirrored in parliamentary tools like no-confidence motions and committee scrutiny.

Reviving these roots—via IKS curricula in civil services training or sabha-inspired citizen parliaments—can fortify Parliament against contemporary disruptions like adjournments and acrimony. By prioritizing amity (non-violence in discourse) and rishi-parampara (sage-like wisdom), India can reclaim svadeshi governance: self-reliant, dharma-centric, and resilient amid diversity.

Future research should integrate IKS digitally—employing AI to simulate Vedic debates for policy testing or VR models of gram sabhas—bridging purana (ancient) with navina (modern). This fusion promises a global model of ethical democracy, rooted in Bharatiya tattva (Indian philosophy).

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