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## THE IDEA OF SELF GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT:

The First serious attempt at the study of India's past began after the great uprising of 1857. A perusal of some introductions to the 'Sacred Books of the East' reveals the motive underlying this great venture extending over years. It was felt by the British rulers that the serious attempt to overthrow them was due to lack of their knowledge of Hindu Dharma, manners, customs and history. Further, the people could not be won over to Christianity and consequently to the empire unless the missionaries acquired an idea of the vulnerable points in their social structure. In their study of the ancient history of India, western scholars reached two important conclusions. In 1859, Max Muller, an indologist of high repute wrote that the Indians are a nation of philosophers and Indian intellect is lacking in political or material speculation and secondly that the Indians never knew the feeling of nationality. Similarly Gibbon pointed out that all oriental history is "one unceasing record of valour, greatness, degeneracy and decay", Green stated that "the empires of the East are, in the main, tax-collecting institutions. They exercise coercive power on their subject of the most violent kind... (and) do not impose laws as distinct from particular and occasional commands." Similar sentiments found expression in the works of eminent scholars stated that India never attained to the idea either of the state or of the motherland and that it could not evolve any political constitution, even in conception.

**KEYWORDS:** Idea of Self Governance , 'Sacred Books of the East' , customs and history.

### INTRODUCTION

Commenting upon these arguments Professor R. S. Sharma points out that such a view about India's past polity was dominated by imperialistic ideology. Its practical implications in the existing set up were dangerous to the demand for self-government in India. If Indians were essentially philosophers, it followed that they were absorbed in the problems of spiritual world and hence their material world should be managed for them by their imperialist masters. If Indians were accustomed to autocratic rule and never had any idea of nationhood, state or self-government, they should be governed autocratically by the British General and Viceroy.<sup>1</sup>

Echoing the same sentiments, another noted Indologist named N. B. Paygee states that "owing to much misunderstanding and immense prejudice caused by deep ignorance in respect of the East ... many a learned man of the west, as also men of lead and light, and some statesmen known to fame make absolutely injudicious statements – injudicious because they are unwise as also far from truth – and even venture to affirm in season and out of season, that the East is all darkness, that the orient is only the hot-bed of barbarious and savages and that it is simply the habital of denizens akin only to beasts and negroes."<sup>2</sup>

But this imperialistic ideology regarding ancient Indian history and particularly the nature of the early

Indian polity is without and foundation and such unproven observations were controverted by Hopkins, the great American savant. But the biggest response to this challenge came from Bhagwan Lal Indrajai, R. G. Bhandarkar, R. L. Mitra and B. G. Tilak during the last three decades of the 19th century. By their researches into the manifold aspects of the past history of this country they built a powerful case for the political and social progress of India since time immemorial. Their efforts were supplemented by R. C. Dutt, Purnendu Narain Singh, A. C. Dass, S. K. Aiyangar and others. However the pioneering work in this field was accomplished by Dr. K. P. Jayaswal as later admitted by D. R. Bhandarkar, R. C. Majumdar, B. K. Sarkar and other scholars who followed them.

These researchers through their untiring efforts, dedication and erudite knowledge established beyond doubt that the inhabitants of this great ancient country i.e. Hindus were well-versed in the art of self-government and their village communities, known as Samities, their popular assemblies or Sabhas, their representative institutions, their republican states and their fascinating constitutional government went back to the Mediaeval Ages, nay the Buddhist period, and even the hoary times of Rigveda. Dr. Pavgee has called "the because it exhibits to us,..... the various forms of Government as also the irresistible power of having exercised its beneficial influence on the Indian mind, and thus made it last long, by its tenacity and heredity."<sup>3</sup>

Hence it is but natural that India or ancient Bharat-Varsha, better known during the Vedic period as Saptasindhu or the Land of the Seven Rivers, should be proud of her claims to originality in having given birth, first and before all, to ideas of self-government, popular representation which seems to have received, from our ancestors, greater attention and higher regard from all stand-points, as years rolled on. The crude ideas and forms of government had gradually grown and blossomed into public institution like the 'Vedic Religious Congress' 'Popular Assembly', and the 'Village Community' popularly known as fonFk] IHkk and lfeFr respectively.

Sometimes it is argued that monarchical system was prevalent in ancient India and the inhabitants of this land were not accustomed to the system of self-rule or republican form of government. But as already stated above, Sabhas and Samities denoted the prevalence of republican system in ancient India. Moreover, one finds that the greatest weight seems to be attached to the concept of public opinion during the vedic period and it is treated in the words of N. B. Pavgee as a 'living entity'.<sup>4</sup> But, apart from the fact that much respect was shown to public opinion, during the Rig-Vedic period and even in subsequent times, while concerted action was considered as a source of enormous strength. In fact, during this period, the voice of the people always predominated; and as public opinion had the controlling influence, it was never, in the least, allowed to be stifled. Besides, in all matters affecting public weal, people's voice and the opinion of the nation had to be strictly paid due attention to; and even such in all important and most solemn function as the election of the king, was executed, as a matter of course by, and with the consent of the people.

Even if it is argued that Vedic family system was patriarchal it is not possible to make a case for a casual connection between patriarchal family organization and a monarchical polity. Commenting upon it Professor V. P. Varma points out "some of the Vedic hymns contains prayer for kingship..... But it is possible to detect in these hymns the fact that the authority of the Vedic king was already established and hence we do not, consequently, have reference to pre-monarchical patriarchal society under the rule of the Pitarah-ancient pristine fathers or prajapatis-patriarchs."<sup>5</sup>

Further more, Kingship arose in Vedic times as a part of the process of the aggregation and integration of the families, tribes, clans and villages into the 'Rashtra'-territorial unit or state. But at the same time the institution of kingship during the Vedic era was elective on the one hand and subject to Samiti and Sabha on the other. Hence the question of the monarch being an autocrat was altogether ruled out.

For further corroboration, an extract from Mr. Anstey's speech in the meeting of the East Indian Association in London is worth revealing. He observes; "we are apt to forget in this country (England), when we talk of preparing people in the East by education and all that sort of thing, for Municipal Government and the Parliamentary Government that the East is the parent of Municipalities. Local Self-Government in the widest acceptance of the term, is as old as the East itself. No matter what may be the religion of the people who inhabit what we call the East, there is not a portion of the country from West to East, from North to South, which is not

swarming with Municipalities; and not only so, but like to our Municipalities of old, they are bound together as in a species of net-work, so that you have readymade to your hand the great system of representation."<sup>6</sup>

Thus in the light of these above-mentioned facts it can be rightly stated that India had enjoyed, under her own indigenous rulers, self-government, constitutional sway, and even government by representation, almost continuously, till, within her own borders and on her own sacred soil, the appearance of foreign influences and foreign invasions, had slowly but steadily ruined them all, leaving here and there but indestructible remnants of the village communities.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. R. K. Mookerjee, a noted historian of high repute observes that "Ancient India believed in the self-government from the Sovereign at the top through all grades and strata of society down to the lowest classes of villages. Every village was self-governing federations. Ancient India was built up as a vast rural democracy.... India owes the preservation of her culture of self governing villages or rural republics in which it was centred through the long course of her history which has seen so many political revolutions and changes of Sovereignty."<sup>8</sup> This powerful remark of an ancient scholar is almost a tribute paid to the Indian system of self rule. The spirit of democracy was found at the root of the lower institutions and not in the highest organs of the state alone.

Thus this account clearly falsify the thesis of Western scholars that the Hindus never freed their politics from the theological and metaphysical environment and therefore they were not competent for self-rule.

If we look deeper into the spiritual life of the country. We shall realize that spirituality to the inward life of the soul. It has also energized the entire community. This found its expression in the highest type of organizational capacity in the external sphere and also on political life. Taken as a whole, history supplies no second instance of a synthetic development of life as we had in India. This has been our unique achievement and has created a special place for India in the annals of the social and political life of human race. The trends thus created by our illustrious forefathers have to be perpetuated and the ideals have to be kept high by us.

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