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## FROM SABHA TO SASANAM: ASSEMBLIES, COUNCILS, AND ROYAL ORDERS FROM VEDIC TO GUPTA INSCRIPTIONS, 1000 BCE–550 CE

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### Abstract

Early Indian governance evolved from clan assemblies to written royal orders. This paper traces that shift using Vedic texts, gana-sangha coinage, and Gupta copper plates. The Rigveda and Atharvaveda reference sabha and samiti as decision-making bodies. Buddhist texts describe sanghas of the Vrijjis and Mallas with voting and quorum. Ashokan edicts replace assemblies with sasanam — written orders from the king. By Gupta times, tamra-sasanas record grants after consultation with vishayapatis and adhikaranas. Three case notes mark the transition. The Vajji confederacy in Mahaparinibbana Sutta shows deliberative rules: meet often, decide by consensus, uphold tradition. The Sohgaura Copper Plate, 3rd c. BCE, is the earliest sasana, ordering grain distribution from state granaries, signed by mahamattas. The Damodarpur Copper Plates of Gupta times record land sales by district boards to private buyers, with the king ratifying the adhikarana's decision. Methodologically, the paper codes texts for decision-making verbs: consult, order, proclaim. Findings show a shift from oral consensus to written delegation. The state retained assemblies but subordinated them to inscribed orders. Sasana created legal certainty and administrative hierarchy. The paper concludes that Indian political development was not despotic. It moved from participatory sabha to documented sasana, balancing local deliberation with central record. Inscriptions are the archive of that constitutional shift.

**Keywords:** Sabha, Sasana, Gana-Sangha, Ashoka, Gupta, Inscriptions, Sohgaura, Damodarpur, Public Administration, Ancient Constitution, Deliberation, Royal Orders

### Introduction

Rigveda 10.191 prays: “Let your samiti be common, common your sabha.” A thousand years later, Gupta copper plates begin: “From the victorious camp, the paramabhattaraka commands the vishayapati and adhikarana.” Between these is a constitutional revolution. Early India governed by assembly. The sabha and samiti were councils of clan elders. Gana-sanghas like the Vrijjis voted and kept minutes. Ashoka still addressed edicts to mahamattas but issued them as sasanam — his order. By Gupta times, the sasana was a legal instrument: a copper plate grant attested by officials, registered by boards, and archived. This paper traces that shift from oral sabha to written sasana. It argues that Indian state formation did not abolish participation. It bureaucratized it. Assemblies remained as adhikaranas and sabhas, but their decisions needed royal ratification on copper. The inscription was the new sabha — public, permanent, and hierarchical. The study uses texts and epigraphs to show how deliberation was preserved within delegation. The result was a hybrid: local consultation, central inscription. This is the unwritten constitution of early India, written on copper.



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## Objectives

The paper tracks decision-making bodies from 1000 BCE to 550 CE across four stages: (1) Vedic sabha/samiti, (2) gana-sangha rules, (3) Mauryan sasanam, (4) Gupta adhikarana. It analyses the Vajji rules, Sohgaura Plate, and Damodarpur Plates as case notes. It codes texts for: who decides, who records, who enforces. It compares Arthashastra 2.10 on shasana with inscriptional practice. It extracts a theory of Indian administrative evolution for comparative politics.

## Review of Literature

K.P. Jayaswal celebrated gana-sanghas as republics but ignored inscriptions. R.S. Sharma saw feudalism in Gupta grants but not assemblies. Upinder Singh noted adhikaranas but not their Vedic roots. Romila Thapar traced the state but not the document. The gap is procedural. How did oral decisions become written orders? This paper uses institutional history to bridge that.

## Methodology

Texts: Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Mahaparinibbana Sutta, Arthashastra. Inscriptions: Sohgaura, Damodarpur, Baigram, Paharpur. Each coded for: decision-maker, council named, verb of order, attestation, medium. The three cases span 800 years. Limits: sabha records are textual, not epigraphic; sasana records are epigraphic, not procedural. The paper infers process from form.

### Case Note: Vajji Gana-Sangha and Deliberative Rules

Mahaparinibbana Sutta lists seven conditions for Vajji welfare: (1) hold frequent assemblies, (2) meet in concord, (3) decide in concord, (4) uphold ancient institutions, (5) respect elders, (6) protect women, (7) maintain shrines. The Buddha says as long as the Vajjis follow these, they cannot be defeated.

This is a constitutional code. The sangha has quorum rules, consensus norms, and respect for precedent. Decision-making is collective. The sabha is sovereign. There is no king. The gana issues orders as a body. Coins of the Yaudheyas and Malavas later bear legends like yau-dhe-ya-ga-na-sya ja-ya, “victory to the Yaudheya gana,” showing corporate authority. The sabha was thus legislature, executive, and court. It met often, kept rules, and bound members. This is deliberative governance, 5th c. BCE.

### Case Note: Sohgaura Copper Plate and the First Sasana

Sohgaura Plate, 3rd c. BCE, Gorakhpur district. Text: “In Mahasthan, in the granary, these two storehouses... At the command of the mahamattas of Shravasti, to the distressed people of... distribution should be made.” It lists rations and names officials.

This is the earliest sasana. It is a written order, from mahamattas, to local officers, for famine relief. It is displayed publicly at a granary. The sabha is gone. The mahamatta commands. The plate is the law. The order is specific, conditional, and auditable. It uses administrative language, not kavya. The state now speaks by



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document. The sasana replaces deliberation with delegation. Yet the granary location suggests public notice, preserving some sabha transparency. This is the pivot: from oral assembly to written command.

### Case Note: Damodarpur Plates and the Adhikarana's Decision

Damodarpur Copper Plate 1, 443 CE, Gupta period. Records the adhikarana of Kotivarsha vishaya, headed by kumaramatya Vetravarman, selling fallow land to a Brahmana. Procedure: (1) application by buyer, (2) inspection by record-keepers, (3) fixation of price, (4) payment to state, (5) ratification by vishayapati, (6) issue of copper plate. The plate ends: "This tamra-sasana is given."

This is delegated governance. The adhikarana is a district board of officials and local elites. It deliberates, prices, and sells. The king does not decide but his vishayapati ratifies. The sasana records the decision and transfers title. The sabha survives as adhikarana, but its output is a royal document. The plate is proof, archive, and law. It combines local consultation with central authority. The inscription makes the sale permanent and public.

### Discussion

Indian governance moved through three stages. One, sabha: Vedic and gana assemblies decided by consensus. Rules were oral, remembered, and enforced by peers. Two, sasanam: Mauryan orders bypassed assemblies. The king commanded by edict. Mahamattas implemented. The stone made the order public but not negotiable. Three, adhikarana: Gupta boards revived deliberation but issued tamra-sasana. The king delegated, the board decided, the plate recorded.

The sasana solved problems of scale and memory. Sabha worked for clans. Empires needed documents. The copper plate created legal certainty across time and distance. It listed boundaries, taxes, and witnesses. It could be produced in court.

Yet sabha did not die. It became adhikarana, sabha, and ur. These bodies deliberated locally, but their decisions needed sasana to be valid. The state thus captured deliberation in writing. This is not despotism. It is bureaucratization of participation.

The medium mattered. Stone edicts were proclamations. Copper plates were contracts. The shift from stone to copper marks a shift from policy to property. Both were public. Both created accountability.

Modern parallels: Gazette notifications, registered sale deeds, and Panchayati Raj resolutions ratified by the Collector. The principle is old: deliberate locally, record centrally, publish publicly.



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## Conclusion

From 1000 BCE to 550 CE, Indian governance evolved from oral sabha to written sasana. The Vedic samiti and gana-sangha made decisions by assembly. The Mauryan sasanam replaced assembly with edict. The Gupta adhikarana restored deliberation but issued tamra-sasana as law. The inscription was the hinge. It preserved the sabha's transparency while enabling the state's scale. The sasana made orders durable, portable, and provable. It turned custom into code and decision into document. Indian political development was thus not a move from freedom to despotism, but from oral consensus to written constitution. The sabha spoke. The sasana wrote. Between them lies the administrative history of early India, inscribed on copper and stone.

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