CHAPTER XII

ASSESSMENT

We propose here to make an assessment of the experiences in republicanism during this period. They reveal strong points of strength and weakness in the republican polity of North-Eastern India. The celebrated passage in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta in which the Buddha, who was a great democrat and who had a very deep political insight, lays down a seven-fold condition under which the Vajjian Republic would prosper and not decline, throws light on the general strength and weakness of the republics of his age. An analytical examination of this passage along with other evidence would lead us to the following conclusion on this topic.

(A) STRENGTH

The internal unity was the mainstay of these republican states. This fact is borne out by the supreme emphasis put on it by the Buddha in the above noted passage of the Mahaparinibbana Sutt. He is stated to have said, "so long, Ananda, as the Vajjians
meet together in concord, rise in concord and carry out their business in concord . . . so long may they be expected not to decline, but to prosper." The Mahābhārata also speaks of unity as the essence of the existence of the Ganas. Kautilya too emphasises that the essence of the strength of a corporation lies in the unity among its members," and all his practical statesmanship was employed for the end of sowing dissension among the corporations. The fact that even a powerful king like Ajātasatru could not dare to attack the Vajjīs without first destroying its unity, points to the same. This precious unity was maintained primarily by enactment of all public affairs by common consent. The Vajjīs are spoken of as holding full and frequent public assemblies, which is not surprising, for the Athenian Ecclesia (sovereign popular assembly) used to hold weekly meeting to transact public affairs.

3. ibid.
4. Vide Arthaśāstra, Bk.XI, Ch.1; Eng. Tr. by Shamasantra, pp.407 f.
7. W.G.De Burgh : The Legacy of the Ancient World,
And in these assembly meetings decisions were made not by majority vote but by unanimity based upon the opinion of the elders which always prevailed. And the political unity had its base in the social unity which must have reigned above all considerations of class, wealth and profession etc. This is indicated among the Liochohavvis by the fact that if one Liochohavi would fall ill, all the others would visit him, and that the whole tribe would join in any ceremony performed in the home of any Liochohavi.

The republican life was organised to a practicable extent on the principle of equality. And this gave a great strength to these republics.

Equality: For, it is inequality which breeds party and factional spirits, personal jealousy and greed and rivalry and race for power, which plague the body politic of a state and finally lead to the vicious circle of insurrection and revolution as means in struggle for power by the disaffected and discriminated section. We do not have any example in these Indian republics of the long and bitter struggle for power between the Plebeians and the Patricians in the Roman Republics of the same age (509-287 B.C.). A Buddhist text testifies to the prevalence of equality among the

Lichohhavis in the following words: "Among them (the Vaiśālians) the rule of having respect for the high, the middle ones, the oldest, the elders is not observed; everyone considers himself to be the rājā, 'I am the rājā, I am the Rājā.' The same might be the case with the other republics. The Mahābhārata also speaks of the same thing in the following words: "There is universal equality by birth in the Gaṇas and also there is equality by Kula."

Superb military power was the another source of strength of these republics. These republics were 'nation-in-arms,' the whole community was Militancy: their army, and this citizen army was therefore immeasurably superior to the hired levies of the monarchies. They usually formed offensive and defensive leagues, as for example the League of the Videhas and Lichohhavis, of the Lichohhavis and the Mallas, and of the 36 republican states; and whenever they formed a league they became invincible. The

10. Lalitavistara (Ed. R.L. Mitra), Ch. III, p. 93.
11. Śāntiparvan, Ch. 107, vrs. 30; Cf. HP., p. 108 and fn. 7 and p. 162.
12. MP., p. 163.
13. Ibid.
15. PHAI., p. 212.
Buddha expressed to the Magadhan Prime Minister Vassakāra that the Vajjis could not be conquered by the Magadhan king except by effecting disunity among them. The very fact that such a powerful king as Ajātasatru could not dare to attack the Vajjis without trying to know beforehand from the Buddha their most vulnerable point of internal disunity, points to the same. Kautilya has also opined that such Samghas as were united in a league were invincible and were to be treated with a policy of peace and subsidy. The Mahābhārata also states that it was almost impossible for enemy to crush federal republics. It may be noted here that the Greek and Roman republics which formed Western counterparts to these Indian republics, were also distinguished for their superb military strength. But their great military power did not make them aggressive like the Greek and the Roman republics. Of course, they fought bravely many wars which came upon them inevitably and in the order of things, as their independence was

18. Śāntiparvan, Ch. 107, vrs. 13–15.
19. Legacy of the Ancient World, Pt. I, p. 190. "The defeat of the Persian invaders of 480 B.C. had made manifest the superiority in war of a trained citizen army (of Greece), animated by loyalty to the free city-state, over the vast but ill-disciplined levies whose sole bond of union was their common subjection to an Oriental despot."
20. ibid., p. 245, "We remark, first, the efficiency of her
inconsistent with the rising tide of the Magadhan and Kosalan imperialism. Both the Sakyan and the Vajjian republics were invaded by king Vidūdabha of Kosala and king Ajātaśatru of Magadha respectively, who wrought their final destruction. It has been remarked that Rome never made peace while a single enemy remained on the Roman soil: we cannot make a similar statement about these Indian republics. However, they were heroic and accomplished in the art of weapons, and ever ready to conquer their enemies.

The rule of Law formed another source of strength of these republics. Like the Roman Republican Code of Twelve Tables, there was the Rule of Law and Praveni-Pothaka or the Book of Justice: Customs or Precedents in the Vajjian Republic, which was the basis of the civic life. Further, a high sense of justice and fairness was maintained, which is evident from the working of the judicial machinery of the Vajjis as detailed (Contd.)

(Rome) military organization. The legion, observed one of the Latin writers, was the inspiration of a God. It combined the weight of the Macedonian Phalanx with superior mobility as was proved in war against Pyrrhus.

21. Ibid., pp. 245-46. "It is a profound error to suppose that the Romans were an aggressive people bent on subduing first Italy and then the world."

22. Ibid., p. 245.

23. Cf. Mbh. op. cit., vrs. 21 (****)
in the Atthakathā. The rule of law, which secures justice and forms the Sine Qua Non of the republican system, was fully present in these Indian republics. We have a strong testimony to this fact in the statement of the Buddha which runs as follows: "So long as they (the Vajjas) enact nothing not already established, abrogate nothing that has been already enacted and act in accordance with the ancient institutions of the Vajjians, as established in former days, and so long they honour and esteem and revere and support the Vajjan Elders, and hold it a point of duty to hearken to their words: So long may they be expected not to decline but to prosper."

Successful Administration and Economic Solvency:

Great administrative virtue constituted another source of strength of these republics. They were specially successful in financial administration, and their treasury remained always full. They encouraged agriculture, industry,
trade and commerce, which kept their treasury full and 
their people quite rich. These republican peoples were 
not solely political animals, but they were economic 
animals as well. Their great richness or economic 
solvency, which is borne out by traditional accounts, 
was the greatest source of their strength. The separation 
of powers and functions, i.e., the judiciary, the military 
command and the executive authority among the Lichchhavis, 
indicates a highly developed political sagacity and a 
vast constitutional experience in these Indian republics. 

Philosophical Basis:

Mr. Saletore observes: "We can only assume that 
the ancient Indian republics, like the Greek City states, 
were brought into existence by the need of self-defence."

28. ibid.
29. Vinaya Pițaka, Mahāvagga, VIII.1.1.1.; SBE., XVII, 
p.171; Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, SBE., XI, p.100; Mahā-
Suddassana Sutta; Dialogues, II, p.200; Cf. Dhammapada 
(Faus.) p.391; Rockhill : Life of the Buddha, p.65; 
Lalitavistara, Eng.Tr., pp.38-39; Beal : Romantic 
History of Śākya Buddha, p.23; HP., p.163; Cf.Mbh. 
Śāntiparva, 107, vrs.81 and 86; Arthasastra, Trs.by 
Shamastra, p.407.
30. HP.,p.164.
31. B.A.Saletore : op.cit., p.120.
While this view is open to doubt, it is quite certain that these Indian republics were not unconscious and instinctive institutions. The existence of a philosophical basis for them is very certainly indicated by an elaborate discussion of the republican institutions in the Mahābhārata and the Arthaśāstra. The full implications of the Theory of the Mahāsammata - the Great Elect - would suggest the existence of some sort of a contractual or consensual theory of political authority which is an essential part of a democratic or republican constitution. Further, it is very likely that the Mahāsammata would stand for the Republican head, as the Buddha, being born and brought up in a republican state and fully conversant with the republican institution, might have tried to give a philosophical basis to the republican polity of his time. And this ideological basis made for a great strength of these republics.

Discipline:

Discipline was another great virtue of these republicans. The discipline here means the habit of subordination to and reverence for the public authority, law, leaders and the public institutions. Without such a

33. Mahābhārata, Śānti-Parvan, Chs. 107 and 81.
34. Arthaśāstra (B.K.), XI, Ch.I.
35. Dialogues, III, pp.77-94.
discipline in its people no state can function and last. The Buddha pays high tributes to the discipline among the Vajjians in the following words: "So long as they enact nothing not already established, abrogate nothing that has been already enacted, and act in accordance with the ancient institutions of the Vajjians, as established in former days: so long as they honour and esteem and revere and support the Vajji Elders and hold it a point of duty to harken to their words: So long as no women or girls belonging to them are detained among them by force or abduction: So long as they honour and esteem and revere and support the Vajjian Chaityas: so long as the rightful protection, defence and support shall be fully provided for the Arahants among them: so long may they be expected not to decline but to prosper." And the stringent political discipline of the Vajjians reminds us of the similar discipline in the people of the Greek City states, which finds classical illustration in the statement of Socrates who, after his condemnation to imprisonment by the Athenians, when he was offered escape from the prison, replied that to evade the Law of the Polis, even when unjustly exercised, was as morally wrong as for a son to do violence to an aged parent.

Individualism Subordinated to Public Good:

It has been remarked by a noted scholar that it can never be affirmed "that in any age of ancient Indian history the individuals ever identified with the state, as the Athenians did with their own state." But Dr. Jayaswal rightly opines otherwise. According to him the Indian republics "as evidenced by coins, take Ganas, the government, as distinct from community; the individual is not lost in the state. At the same time unity between the two is so complete that the two are very identical." The existence of this fact in these republic is also indicated by the Vajjians according honour, esteem and support to the Elders (leaders or persons in authority) and holding it a point of duty to harken to their words. Thus the identification of the individual with the state was another source of strength of these republics.

Longevity:

And finally, as Dr. Jayaswal very aptly observes: "The best test of the success of a state system is the length of life which it can secure for the state." The republican system of India, as a class, proved very successful in securing longevity. These republics were

40. HP., p. 165.
41. Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, op. cit.
42. HP., p. 167.
43. See further, ibid.
no exception to this fact. For example, the Licheshhavis, the most powerful of these republics, lasted over a full millenium. Neither the republics of Athen, Rome, Venice and Geneva, nor the French and the Chinese republics of the 19th and the early 20th centuries could claim a similar greatness. This most impressively shows how the principles regulating the life of these republics stood well the test of time, indicating the unique soundness of the republican polity of the North-Eastern India.

(B) WEAKNESS

These republics suffered from certain weaknesses of which their smallness in size was most conspicuous. They were by and large very small political units. It may be noted that in Greece the area covered by a city state seldom exceeded a few dozen of square miles around the City of Acropolis. It is not correct to make a similar statement about these Indian republics; for, the republic of the Licheshhavis was a very extensive one, and it was held to be on par with the kings of Kosala and Magadha of the Buddha's time who ruled over the two biggest and

44. ibid.; Cf. History of Mithilā, p.161.
no exception to this fact. For example, the Lichhāvīs, the most powerful of these republics, lasted over a full 44 millennium. Neither the republics of Athen, Rome, Venice and Geneva, nor the French and the Chinese republics of the 19th and the early 20th centuries could claim a similar greatness. This most impressively shows how the principles regulating the life of these republics stood well the test of time, indicating the unique soundness of the republican polity of the North-Eastern India.

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44. ibid.; Cf. History of Mithilā, p.161.
most powerful states of this age. But, excepting the Lichchhavi, the other republics were comparatively very small in size and population. The smallness of these republics made for their great weakness. As Jayaswal observes: "Nation and States which remain small, whatever their virtues, are not allowed to exist. Large states which developed greedy fangs, devoured up small sovereignities." It was the rise of powerful kingdoms of Kosala and the Magadha which destroyed the Sakyan and the Lichchhavi republics. And finally, it was the rise of the Mauryan imperialism which swooped upon and devoured the other Indian republics. The human history by and large confirms the celebrated epigram that "God is on the side of the big battalions" (Napoleon). The Mahabharata also speaks of the Arājaka state easily breaking up like wood which does not know how to bend when engaged in encounter with a strong force. The same text therefore recommends system of confederacy as sine qua non for the survival and prosperity of the Ganas. This was very true of all democratic republics. We have the most remarkable

46. HP., p. 167.
47. Śānti-Parvan, LXVI, pp. 6-7 (Kumb.).

मेवे गणा विनस्त्रेऽपरिनिधित्वं सुज्ञयः परः।
तस्मात् सम्पत्तिमेतेन प्रक्षेतन्तु गणा: सत्त।
illustration of this fact in the easy capitulation of the Śākyas and the Licchāhavīs when they were faced with the strong monarchical powers of Kosala and Magadha respectively. The same weakness was noticeable in the Greek republics which easily submitted to the Macedonian imperialism.

Internal disunity was the greatest and also the gravest weakness of these Indian republics. The Buddha in his enumeration of the seven conditions for the prosperity of the

Internal Dissension: Vajjians laid supreme emphasis on preservation of the internal harmony and concord, indirectly pointing to their falling prey to internecine disharmony which was considered most fatal to their survival. This assessment of the Buddha about the drawbacks in the republican polity of his time finds echo in the Mahābhārata and

49. Dialogues, III, p.80, "Speaks of the Śākyan paying homage to the Kosala king" which suggests the acceptance of their easy defeat, Dh.A., HOS., XXII, pp.44-45. Beal : Records of the Buddhist World, Vol.II, pp.11-12, which speaks of the crushing defeat meted out to the Śākyas.

50. Turnour : Atthakathā, JASB., De. 1839, pp.994, f.n.996 f.n.; Cf. Basah who opines that the Licchāhavīs' defeat was not easy, but they were defeated after a very hard battle (Pros.Indian History Congress, 1951, p.40.)

51. Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Dialogues, II, pp.80 f.
the Arthaśāstra. According to the Mahābhārata, the internal dissension was the real danger to a republic and fear from outside enemies as compared to that was nothing. Kautilya, who was most unsympathetic to the republics, suggests several crooked methods by which internal dissensions among them could be effected.

There were a number of factors which worked for internal disunity among these republics, and among which the most conspicuous were personal rivalry and greed for power, factious and group spirits, mutual recriminations in assembly debates and family quarrels. All these factors must have led to jockeying for power and positions in the republics, which is very strongly suggested by the replacement of Śuddhodana, who was one time the president of the Sakyan republic, by Bhaddiya who was a young cousin of the Buddha. We may here note also that the discomfiture of the Vaijjas at the hand of the Magadhan king Ajātaśatru was brought about primarily by internal disunity effected among them by Vassakāra, due to which the Licchhavis ceased to come to the public assembly when the tocsin sounded the call to fight the aggressors.

52. Śāntiparvan, Ch.107, vrs.82-89.


55. Altekar : op.cit., p.123 (on the evidence of Mahābhārata, op.cit., Ch.81); See also ibid., Ch.107, vrs.30.

56. HZ., p.10.
These republics appear to have been highly deficient in political and diplomatic maturity. And this made them usually fall an easy victim to intrigues and conspiracies by their enemies. The most classical illustration of this

Liable to Intrigues: weakness in them is to be found in the unique success which the Magadhan statesman Vassakāra achieved in manipulating internal disunity among the Vajjis prior to the military operation by king Ajātaśatru, which was the main factor in bringing about their final destruction.

The great difficulty experienced by these republics in maintaining their state secrets was the obvious and natural drawback

Inability to Keep Secret: in their polity, which was experienced then and which is being experienced now by the popular and democratic governments. All the vital decisions of war and peace were arrived at in an open assembly after a lot of debate and discussion which could be easily known to the enemies, especially in the monarchies which usually maintained very effective espionage system, and

58. ibid., Cf. Mbh. op. cit., Ch. 107, vrs. 31.

59. Ante. Ch. IV; Cf. Mbh. op. cit., vrs. 8. मन्यांवर्ये
पुः बृहन्मयिति में मति: |
which could be taken full advantage of by them. This fact finds glaring illustration in how the Magadhan Statesman Vassakāra successfully effected internal disunity among the Lichāhavās which he noticed in the fact that when the toesin was sounded none of the Lichāhavās turned up to the assembly. He communicated this news to his emperor Ajātaśatru who whereupon attacked the Lichāhavās with a huge force and overpowered them. It is by way of remedy to this great defect in the republican polity that the Mahābhārata suggests formation of a small cabinet which alone was to deal with matters requiring secret deliberation, and also the maintenance of an efficient spy system.

Small states could survive in the face of challenge from big powers by their ability to unite into political unions. But this virtue appears to have been conspicuously absent in these republics. Of course, we have the knowledge of the Confederation of the Videha and the Lichāhavās which was called the Vajji or Vriji, of

60. Śānti-Parvan, Ch.107, vrs.23-24.

61. Kh., p.15.
the Liochhavvis and the Mallas, of the Mallas of Pāvā and Kusinārā, of the Śākyas and the Koliyas, and of the Liochhavi, the Mallas and the Eighteen Gaṅgārāja of Kāśi and Kosala. But, like the leagues of the Greek City republics, such combinations, except in the case of the Vajjīs, appear to have lacked permanence, consistency and solidarity. The Śākyas and the Koliyas fought among themselves on the insignificant question of the priority in turn to irrigate their respective fields from the water of the river Rohnī which ran through their territories.

There was a bitter fight between the Liochhavvis and the Mallas for the desecration of the water of the Coronation tank at Vaiśālī by the Mallian general Bandhula who bathed his wife in the tank to satisfy her pregnancy desire. The Śākyas fell a helpless victim to the most barbarous attack.

62. Kalpa-Sūtra, 128 (SBE., XXII, p.266); Cf. Jayaswal : op.cit., pp.47-48; Cf. JBOAS., Vol.I, p.103. This Confederacy was existing at the time of the death of Mahāvīra, C.545 or 527 B.C.
64. B.C.Law : Kṣatriya Clans, p.203.
65. Kalpa-Sūtra, 128.
66. Kuṭāla Jātaka, Jat. (Cowell), V, p.219; Dh.A., HOS., XXX, pp.70 f.
of the Kosalan king Vidūdabha. A similar was the fate of the Lichhadhavas whose chief Chataka had to fight alone on being deserted by the Confederate chieftains and consequently to surrender to the enemy. These few instances will suffice to show how the tendency to break up was more marked in these Indian republic than to form stable unions which alone could guarantee their survivals. That is why, according to the Mahābhārata, "the greatest safety of Gana is considered to be in a confederacy only."

Equality is one of the essentials of a democratic state. We have already seen how equality prevailed in these Gana states or republics. And it may be safely assumed that the greater must have been the emphasis laid on equality. But when the principle of equality tends to be misused, i.e., the many who are equally free and privileged under the law think themselves equal in other respects and claim to be equal in ability.

68. IL., pp.5-6.
70. Śānti-Parvan, Ch.107, vrs. 32.
71. See Supra, p.461.
in virtue, in dignity and in wealth, leading to contempt of moral goodness and intellectual worth, it causes a serious inner threat to the existence of a democratic state. And this serious disease appears to have developed in the organism of these Gana States. This is most clearly borne out by the utmost taunt and ridicule to which operation of equality among the Lichas is held by the writer of a later Buddhist text in the following oft-quoted words: "Amongst them (Vaiśāli) the rule of having respect for the high, the middle ones, the oldest, the elders is not observed; every one considers himself to be the rājā. 'I am the rājā, I am the rājā.' No one becomes the follower of another." It was obviously to prevent this that Buddha stressed respect and obedience to the Elders as a condition for the prosperity of the Vajjas.


73. Vide Lalitavistara (Ed. R.L.Mitra), Ch.III, p.93.

74. Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Infra,107; Cf. Mbh. op.cit., Ch. 107, vrs.16.

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These republics were great sticklers to their constitutional rules and the law of the country. Their too much emphasis on the observance of long and complicated constitutional procedure and law in the administration of their public or state affairs, hampered efficiency, speed, timely actions, initiative and expediency which are so essential for good government, strength and survival of a state. Especially, this hampered their ability to adapt to a new condition and to mobilise quickly their resources to meet any emergent situation arising from foreign invasion or any other quarters. This finds a classical illustration in the famous story telling us how even a small matter like the proposal of the Kosalan king Pasendi (Prasenajit) asking for one of the daughters of the Śākya chiefs as his wife was debated in their Mote-Hall and was rejected, perhaps under the Law of their country which forbade giving their girls in marriage to any outsider. But they sent him a girl named Vāsabha Khattiya, the daughter, by a slave girl, of one of their chiefs. By her Pasendi had a son named Vidūdaccha. And it was in the consequence of the anger kindled in Vidūdaccha's heart at the discovery of the

75. Vide seven conditions of the prosperity of the Vajjians enunciated by the Buddha in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, Dialogues, II, pp. 79–85.
fraud that, having determined to wreak his vengeance on the Śākyas, he, on coming to the throne, invaded their country, took their city, and put to death a great number of the members of the clan, without distinction of age and sex. We also find the Śākyas wrangling in their Mote-Hall and unable to arrive at a quick and unanimous decision on such a vital question as the ultimatum to surrender served on them by the Kosalan king who was besieging the capital. And it was under their operation that such a flagrant social abnormality as the courtesan system in Vaiśāli developed.

76. HI., pp.5-6.
78. For details, see Ante. Ch.VII. P.268.