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Administrative Traditions and Parliamentary Challenges in India: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The evolution of governance in the Indian subcontinent reflects continuity rather than rupture, with contemporary democratic institutions developing upon long-established administrative traditions that have shaped state-society relations over centuries. This study examines the persistent tension between state-led centralization and the socially fragmented structure of Indian society, a dynamic that has consistently influenced the trajectory of Indian political development. Through an examination of the Mauryan and Mughal administrative systems, the paper highlights how pre-modern states balanced revenue extraction and political control by relying upon intermediary social structures. The analysis then turns to the contemporary challenges confronting India's parliamentary institutions, focusing on legislative performance, declining deliberation, and the criminalization of politics during the 17th Lok Sabha. Finally, the paper evaluates major structural reforms currently under debate, arguing that the realization of the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 depends upon reconciling historical centralization with the demands of a pluralistic and deliberative democracy.

Keywords

Indian administration, Parliamentary democracy, Mauryan empire, Mughal mansabdari, One Nation One Election, Criminalization of politics.

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1. Introduction

An informed assessment of prospective reforms in India's parliamentary democracy—such as proposals for electoral synchronization and the expansion of women's representation—necessitates a deeper engagement with the historical evolution of administrative institutions in the subcontinent. The contemporary Indian state is not an isolated construct but rather the outcome of a long institutional continuum, wherein successive regimes adapted and reconfigured governance structures while preserving certain enduring features, notably centralized authority and embedded social hierarchies. Pre-colonial administrative systems, often simplistically characterized as either despotic or politically fragmented, in fact exhibited considerable institutional sophistication. These systems developed nuanced mechanisms to govern a territorially vast and socially heterogeneous society, balancing local autonomy with overarching central control. Such arrangements reflected a pragmatic engagement with diversity, enabling rulers to accommodate regional variations in customs, economic organization, and social stratification. Therefore, a historically grounded understanding of these administrative traditions provides critical analytical insight into the structural continuities and constraints that shape present-day parliamentary functioning and reform trajectories in India.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Stratification & Administration

In the Indian context, social stratification—most prominently articulated through the caste system—has historically functioned not merely as a social ordering principle but also as an embedded mechanism of governance (Dirks, 2001; Thapar, 2002). Rather than existing outside the administrative domain, caste-based hierarchies were deeply intertwined with the organization of authority and the regulation of social and economic roles. Evidence from early urban formations and later Vedic social structures indicates a gradual yet systematic institutionalization of hierarchy, wherein distinctions of status, occupation, and ritual purity became integral to the broader governance framework. Over time, these roles were normatively anchored within the moral and philosophical construct of Dharma, which provided a legitimizing basis for both social obligations and political authority. This normative embedding enabled governance to function through internalized social codes and customary

practices, thereby reducing the need for continuous coercive intervention. Consequently, authority was often exercised in an indirect and decentralized manner, with rulers relying on caste elites, local notables, and community leaders as intermediaries. Such a system not only facilitated administrative reach across territorially expansive and culturally diverse regions but also contributed to a relatively stable form of social control rooted in legitimacy rather than force.

3. Historical Evolution and Contemporary Challenges of Administrative and Parliamentary Institutions

3.1 The Mauryan Administrative State

The Mauryan Empire marked a significant transformation in the history of Indian administration by attempting to establish a centralized political structure across a large and diverse region. Kautilya's Arthashastra conceptualized the state as an integrated system composed of interdependent elements, each fulfilling a specific administrative function (Kangle, 1965). Governance under the Mauryas was characterized by extensive bureaucratic specialization, with officials overseeing agriculture, trade, taxation, and industry. This centralized structure was reinforced by a formal intelligence network designed to monitor both internal administration and external threats.

Table-1: The Saptanga Theory of Statecraft

Element (Anga)	Administrative Significance	Modern Parallel
Swami (Head)	The Sovereign; apex of executive power bound by Dharma.	Head of State/PMO
Amatya (Eyes)	Council of Ministers; implementers of policy.	Civil Service/Cabinet
Janapada (Legs)	Territory and Population; revenue and labour base.	Citizenry/Economy
Kosha (Mouth)	The Treasury; lifeline of administration.	Ministry of Finance
Danda (Brain)	The Army/Force; instrument of coercion.	Military/Police

3.2 The Mughal Administrative Synthesis

Mughal governance combined military organization with Persian administrative practices, producing a highly structured system of rule. The Mansabdari system integrated civil and military responsibilities within a graded hierarchy that regulated service obligations and remuneration (Richards, 1993). Financial administration was conducted through the Jagirdari system, wherein officials were compensated through revenue assignments rather than land ownership. Frequent transfers of jagirs

prevented local entrenchment but also limited long-term investment. The system relied heavily on locally embedded administrative specialists who translated imperial directives into effective governance at the village level.

3.3 Crisis of the Legislative Institution

The post-independence transformation of subjects into citizens marked a significant constitutional shift; however, recent parliamentary data indicates growing institutional strain. An assessment of the 17th Lok Sabha reveals a contrast between high legislative productivity and declining deliberative quality (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). Reduced committee scrutiny, limited debate, and deviations from constitutional conventions collectively point toward an erosion of parliamentary accountability.

Table-2: 17th Lok Sabha Performance Metrics (2019-2024)

Metric	Statistic	Implications for Democracy
Productivity	~97%	High volume of legislation passed; efficient but potentially hasty.
Committee Referral	16%	Historic low (down from 71% in 15 th LS); lack of expert scrutiny.
Hasty Passage	35%	Bills passed with less than one hour of discussion.
Deputy Speaker	Vacant	Violation of Article 93 convention; weakened checks on the Speaker.

3.4 Criminalization of Politics

Recent electoral trends reveal a steady increase in the number of legislators facing criminal charges (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024). Candidates with criminal backgrounds demonstrate significantly higher electoral success rates, often driven by perceptions of influence and winnability. This phenomenon undermines democratic accountability and constrains bureaucratic independence, as administrative officials may hesitate to act against politically influential individuals.

3.5 Structural Reforms and Future Trajectories

In response to these challenges, several major reforms have been proposed. Electoral synchronization aims to reduce administrative disruption and fiscal expenditure, though concerns regarding federal balance remain. Similarly, the proposed reservation of legislative seats for women has the potential to reshape parliamentary representation, but its implementation remains contingent upon delimitation and census processes. Strengthening opposition institutions and revisiting anti-defection provisions are also essential for restoring parliamentary deliberation.

4. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Indian governance reflects a continuous negotiation between central authority and social diversity, as evidenced in administrative formations from the Mauryan and Mughal periods to the present constitutional framework. These enduring patterns demonstrate that contemporary parliamentary challenges are not isolated developments but are deeply rooted in long-standing institutional arrangements that privilege administrative control alongside mediated representation. While administrative efficiency has remained a consistent objective, contemporary parliamentary trends raise concerns about the diminishing role of deliberation and legislative oversight. This shift underscores the need to critically reassess the balance between executive dominance and parliamentary accountability in sustaining democratic vitality. The sustainability of Indian democracy depends upon harmonizing strong administrative capacity with meaningful legislative debate and institutional accountability. Achieving the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 will require reinforcing constitutional morality alongside effective governance, while also revitalizing participatory institutions that can mediate between state authority and societal diversity.

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