

RELEVANCE OF ANCIENT INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAHABHARATA



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In India, human life from times immemorial has been forged by the highest truths of philosophy. Their ideas of life and universe and their metaphysical beliefs must be understood in the true spirit. For, “the metaphysical beliefs of man are in fact the finally determining factors in all his actions. It is in the light of our beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality that we formulate our conceptions of right and wrong and it is in this light of our conceptions of right and wrong that we frame our conduct; not only in relations of private life, but also in the sphere of politics and economics. So far from being irrelevant, our metaphysical beliefs are the finally determining factors in all our actions”.¹

It will thus be clear that the ancient Hindu Polity has not been studied in its true perspective and the entire thought of the people was not taken into consideration in drawing inferences from it. This has been the case not only of the Vedic literature but of post-Vedic and of the Epic Literature. Before dealing with the actual thought of the Mahabharata it is necessary to bring out how the Vedic principles were brushed aside, and unless one understands the Vedic principles and the culture depicted in the time of the Vedas, all our estimate of the Mahabharata will be on the wrong track. We shall, therefore, briefly state the Vedic principles and try to know how there is a continuity of it in the later literature.

Pre-Epic Political Thoughts and

Institutions:

The Pre-Epic Literature reveals the truth that ancient people of the Vedic and post-Vedic era has clear and distinct notions of state (राज्य), Nation (राष्ट्र), King (राजन्), State craft (राज्यविद्या) and other allied thoughts about politics. Repeatedly in the hymns we meet with those words. And it can be inferred that the people possessed knowledge of the administration and ruling the country. Society was in a state of order and there appears to be different organisations of the nature of State performing political, social and economic activities.

The King:

From the 'Vajapeya' ceremony or the ceremony of vesting sovereignty in the king, it can be inferred that the State or Kingdom was entrusted to the king and he was to be the guardian, the protector, the director or the regulator of the realm. In Satapath [V.2.1.25] we find:

हयं ते राष्ट्र यत्तासि यचमतो ध्रुवोसि वरुणः
। कृश्यै त्वा क्षेमाय त्वा रयै त्वा पोशाय त्वा ।।

“To thee this state is given; thou art the director and regulator, thou art steadfast and bearer (of this state or responsibility) to these (this state is given) for agriculture, for well-being, for prosperity or development.”

The words 'this state is given' make one aspect of Hindu Polity abundantly clear. The King in India was never regarded

as absolute. He was a trustee placed in charge of the trust of the whole realm under his protection. The people entrusted to him the care and administration of the state and naturally the possessed the right of dethroning him from the throne if he was found to be wanting in the required qualification or if he did not discharge his duties. Deposition of a king was prevalent in both the Vedic and post-vedic age.

Forms of Government

Monarchy seems to be the established form of Government. The earlier form of government must have been democratic, but of a simple type. Democracy means a government of the people ['Demons' means people and 'archy' means authority]. The origin and development of the state clearly shows that this must have been the form of government in the very early stages of human society. The fight between the Devas and the Asuras cited above is perhaps descriptive of this state. The Mahabharata describes the stage when there was neither a state nor a king.² This happy stage gradually deteriorated due to factors, both psychological and social. Kingship came into being. Its primary aim was the protection of the people and the establishment of peaceful conditions essential not only for the development of man but also for the enjoyment of life.

Even a casual reader of the Vedic literature cannot fail to observe the occurrence of various words relating to government and authority. Raja (राजा), Rajya (राज्य), Rajan (राजन्), Swarajya (स्वराज्य), Adhirajya (अधिराज्य), Swarashtra (स्वराष्ट्र), Samrat (सम्राट), Samrajya (साम्राज्य), Bahurajya (बहुराज्य), Vairajya (वैराज्य), Maharajya (महाराज्य) and Sarvabhūm (सार्वभौम), Ganapati (गणपती), Vishwapati

(विश्वपती), Adhipati (अधिपती), Virat (विराट), Gana (गण).

These in all probability indicate the prevalence of monarchial forms of government of different types as well as the existence of organisations or types of associations as suggested by words such as 'Gana' and 'Ganapati'. So far we have seen that in the Vedic and post-Vedic era, people has definite notions about the king (महाराज्य), State (महाराज्य) and Nation (महाराज्य). The word State was not only an abstract idea to those thinkers of the day but it meant something concrete. They identified the State with the king and they made little distinction between the State and the King.

The Vedic people always thrilled with the sentiment of nationality. In Shukla Yajurveda, we find that the people prayed for a prosperous and organised society. In Shatapata Brahmana also we come across their idea of Nation.

The People as a whole worked for the happiness, progress and development of their nation. There were duties of protection enjoined on the king and active cooperation for the State enjoined on the subjects. The people entertained noble ideals and strove to achieve them in their daily lives. Every citizen wished to make his nation great and glorious. All these political aspirations and ideals are found to be reflected in later literature and as such the political thought of the Epic is a lineal descendant of the Vedic.

Theory of State in Mahabharat

A comparative study of political theories of different countries will enable any reader to study the political thought of Bharat. Moreover the political thought of any nation is essentially interwoven with

the ideas of the state. A careful study of the origin of the ideas of the state will be interesting. The political ideas of Greece are always supposed to be the chief source of the history of the political thought of Europe. It is noted that all the terms in the politics of Greece and Rome are evident corruption of similar Sanskrit terms. 'Comitia' (Samiti समिती), 'Curiata' (to govern सुर), 'Rex' (Rajan राजन्-राजा-रक्ष), 'Juris' (Arjus अर्जुस), 'Decemviris' (Dashavara दशावरा), 'Triumviris' (Tryavara त्र्यवरा), 'Socius' (Sakhi सखिन्), 'Politics' (Pura पुरम्) and 'Economics' (Okas ओकस a house). These and various other terms, as has been philologically explained, have their origin in Sanskrit roots. The term must, therefore, have been borrowed from the Indian concepts or they indicate a common origin for both.

The word 'Socius' is a corruption of the Sanskrit word 'Sakha' which literally denotes a perfect union of two beings through common sympathies as exemplified in the expression तस्मात्सखा त्वमासि यन्मम तस्मैवैव.³ The words 'Society' and 'Socius', therefore, contain in a nutshell the original development of the political thought of man. The society of man began, when side by side with the gregarious instinct, man began to have mutual sympathies. The history of the word 'society' enables us to understand that the state did not begin with the individual but with the family of individuals. It points to the fact family and not individual formed the first basis that laid the foundation of society. For a good while many such families must have lived happily side by side with each other in perfect harmony and enjoyed the fruits of their labour. This perhaps, is the ideal state described in the Mahabharata, when there was no

sovereign, no state and no law. Men, however, lived in perfect harmony.

न वै राज्यं न राजाऽऽसीन्नच दण्डो न दाण्डिकः । धर्मेणैव प्रजाः सर्वा रक्षन्ति सम परस्परम् ॥⁴ This not an Arajaka state. The Mahabharata describes this state as a happy state diametrically opposite to the mastyanyaya of the Arajaka. न तस्मिन्युग संसर्गे व्याघयो नेन्द्रियक्षमः । नासूया नापिस्नदितं न दर्पो न च पैशुनम् ॥ नविग्रहः कुतस्तन्द्नी न ब्देवो न च पैशनम् । न भयं नापि संतापो न चेश्या न च मत्सरः ॥⁵ The Arajaka State mentioned in the Mahabharata means a state ill-governed.

It has also been acknowledged by eminent writers that Greece was influenced by Egypt and other countries from very early times. The Greek word 'Polis' which means a city-state seems to be a corruption of Sanskrit word पुर or पुः. The word 'Polis' is quite different from the 'Poly' in words such as Polygamy. There 'Poly' seems to be the corruption of the Vedic word 'Puru' पुरु which means 'many'. Economics is probably the corruption of ओकस् a house. The history of village communities in India clearly shows that the communities were in fact tiny states and different from the 'Greek Polis' mainly in their foreign politics and ideas of war and aggrandisement.⁶

It will not be far from correct to say that the whole Mahabharat abounds in political thoughts; but the political thought is particularly reflected through the 'Kanik Niti' of 'Adi Parvan', the 'Narad Niti' of 'Sabha Parvan', the 'Vidur Niti' of 'Udyoga Parvan' and the portion of 'Santi Parvan' popularly known as 'Rajadharmaparvan'. Each of them lays stress on a particular aspect of politics. The Mahabharat regards the individual, sovereignty and government as the three components of the

state. The 'Vidur Niti' lays its emphasis on the individual as a political being. The 'Narda Niti' is concerned more with the government and the sovereign, and the 'Rajadharma Parvan' describe in detail the political ideas regarding the actual working of the state and government. The kanik Niti particularly deals with state-craft and the state diplomacy. It will be interesting to note that the Sanskrit word for the population in a 'State' which forms the subject is 'Prakriti' :प्रकृतिद्ध प्रकृतया पौराणाम श्रेणयोऽपिच ।⁷ The use of the word 'Prakriti' is itself eloquent and tell us the essence of the basic political thought. The term is originally a philosophic one. The use of this term in politics shows that long before the use of these word political ideas has attained a degree of perfection and already crystalised into the form now available in the Epic and in the later works. In fact the people themselves performed all the functions of the state and the sovereign authority was, in a way, neutral but its presence was required as a symbol to keep the machinery of government always working. Legislation was not at all regarded as necessary function of government. As described in Amara- स्वाभ्यमात्स सुहृद् कोश राष्ट्र दुर्ग बलानि च ।।17, राज्यांगानि प्रकृतयः पौराणां श्रेणयोऽपिच ।।18.⁸ "The king, the ministry, the friends, the treasury, the nation, and the means of protection such as forts and armies are the seven constituents of a state." These seven constituents are now and again mentioned in Mahabharat. राज्ञा सप्यैव रक्ष्माणि तानि चैव निबोध मे। आत्मा मांत्याश्च कोशाश्च दण्डो मिखाणि चैव हि ।। 64, तथाऽजनपदाश्चैव पुरंच कुरुनन्दन ।।⁹

The Mahabhrata shows that at the time of the Bhartiya was different types of political organisation e.g. the empires, kingdom, democracies small but

independent communities, the Grama, the Sangha were in existence in Bharata. The same state continued until very recent times. From these seven constituents of state cited above, it become clear that they do not imply government. The word Rajya and Rashtra denote two distinct and different ideas. Rashtra does not simply mean population. It means a culturally homogeneous group organised together cherishing similar ideals and breathing common sentiments. In the Shukla Yajurveda there appears a prayer to be uttered at the time of the Ashwamedha sacrifice which points to the notions of nationality and nation:

आ ब्रह्मन्ब्राह्मणो ब्रह्मवर्चसी जायतामा राष्ट्रे
राजन्य शुरेऽइशव्योऽतिव्याधी महारथो
जयतान्दोग्धी धेनुर्वोढानड्वानाशुः

सप्तिःपुरन्धिर्योशा जिष्णु रथेश्ठाः सभेयो युवास्य
यजमानस्य वीरो जायतान्निकामेनिकामे नः पर्जन्यो
वर्शतु फलवत्यो

नऽऔशधः पच्यन्तायोगक्षेमो नः कल्पताम् ।¹⁰

Such an organised and prospersous society, however small it may be, was called a 'Rashtra'. In the ancient world of the west the word 'State' has been identified with the idea of power and might. In Bharat it is permanently allied with the idea of 'satisfaction'. रंजिताश्च प्रजा सर्वा स्तेन राजेति शब्दते ।¹¹ Even in the times of the hymns we find the idea of 'Rajya' or 'Raja' linked with the happy ideas of order, peace, satisfaction, etc. The Rigveda, the Atharveda and the Brahmanas provide information about the evolution of political concepts from the tiny state to the full fledged empire. All the forms of state e.g. राज्य, स्वराज्य, अधिराज्य, साम्राज्य, वैराज्य, पारमेशिठ राज्य, सार्वभौमत्व महाराज्य, महाराजाधिपत्य attained a definite shape during the period of the Veda

literature and it may, therefore, be safely inferred that there prevailed different forms of government at the time of the Mahabhrata.

The idea about the state in the West was in the beginning abstract because their fountainhead i.e. the Greek philosophy was itself in a sceptical mood. It will be patent from the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle that though the former was a perfect idealist and the latter the adopter of strict scientific methods of investigation, none of them had definite ideas about metaphysics and could not therefore give a logically reliable foundation to their political structures. Naturally, the consequence was that even in Europe the word 'State' remained for a long time without any definite meaning and it was only in the Seventeenth Century that it began to be interpreted somewhat as we now understand it. British philosopher T.D. Weldon while acknowledging the fact said that, "State as might be expected on historical grounds is not even a very old word in English. It dates, as far as the usage in which we are interested is concerned, only from the middle of the sixteenth century." ¹² As described above, the individual, the government, the sovereign or sovereign body and statecraft are the four essentials of a State. We have to find out what the Epic has to say on each of these.

Aristotle, the father of political science in the west, in his famous treatise on 'politics' starts with these very ideas and acknowledges them as fundamental. His political principles, however, vastly differ from those of Bharat. His definition of state is enough to show this. In Bharat the state is regarded as an institution. Aristotle defines it as an 'association'. He also says that it is a 'number of citizens as is sufficient for independence of life'. He also realises full well that 'happiness' is the end of all human

activities and also that to be happy man must be 'good'. Therefore, he says that in order to determine who a worthy citizen is and what the character of a worthy citizen must be, it is necessary to begin with the definition of happiness.¹³ Bhartiya thinkers and Aristotle agree that for a state to be prosperous and happy, the character of the individual who, as already said, is always the vital constituent of the State, must be disciplined and trained on proper lines. The Nitis of the Mahabharat have laid much stress on this point.

Indian philosophy integrated all branches of human knowledge into the grand fundamental principle of oneness of the individual soul with the whole being and deduces from it, "a coherent system of philosophical ethics," which according to some, the west is even now wanting."¹⁴

Conclusion

It will be evident from that Bharitya people have always held a synthesis view on life which is written large in all their literature, philosophy, religion and tradition. This has given rise to many misgivings in the minds of several writers. They feel that Indian Political thought does not pay adequate attention to the analysis of the organs of government, its forms and structure and that it is concerned more with jurisdiction, administration and functions of government for the maintenance of law and order in the state. But this is due to lack of knowledge and narrow thinking. Narada Niti in 'Mahabharat' makes it clear that all the four components of modern polity have been in developed state at the time of the Mahabharat. The State, the sovereign, the people and government are the four pillars of polity. The Vedic literature and the Mahabharata point to the fact that all these concepts were well

developed and that the views of modern political thought were present in them. Modern political thinkers will agree that peace, prosperity and happiness of society are the ends of any polity. Applying this canon to the political thought of the Mahabharat and the Pre-Mahabharat age, it may be inferred that the political ideas of the ancient Rishis were on right lines and India enjoyed peace, prosperity and happiness for a long time.

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