

## 16. The 'Indian Civilizational' Underpinnings to the Study of Political Science

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### ABSTRACT

*The study of Political Science as a discipline, like most other Social Sciences, tends to trace its history to the Greek civilizational period, right from the word 'Politics' derived from the Greek word-POLITIKA, from Aristotle's classic work-POLITICS. Similarly, most of the concepts and theories in Political Science are also theorized by the Western scholars.*

*However, politics is a fundamental activity which seeks to regulate the complex of relations among people living in a society. Thus, like there was a Greek thought, Chinese thought, there was a very mature Indian political tradition that can be traced to the Vedas and through the Epics of Ramayana (Book 2), Mahabharata- Shanti Parva (Book 12) and Kautilya's Arthashastra.*

*These treatises obviously reflect the political, social, cultural conditions of ancient India however; they do provide a rich intellectual background to our understanding of many basic concepts, ideas, and theories in Political Science. It is important for us to revisit these Texts and bring forth to the new generation and the World, at large, the scholarly insights of the Indian Knowledge System in the teaching learning of Political Science.*

**Keywords**-Indian Knowledge System, State, Political Science, Kautilya, Shanti Parva

### Introduction

We have always exhibited a deep sense of pride in belonging to one of the oldest civilizations of the world as a part of our 'identity' but at the same time, we have failed as a Nation to acknowledge and weave the rich academic tradition into an integral part of our knowledge system. The impact of the western education through the colonial times and in the post-colonial phase, directed our thinking towards the 'acceptance' of the Western dominant trends in academia. The framing of the curricula in the disciplines tended to borrow the ideas, concepts, theories primarily from the developed Western nations. While it is true that many of the modern concepts in Social Sciences emerged in the post Renaissance period in Europe and left a deep imprint on the world, yet it is equally true that many of the fundamental ideas in many subjects are strongly rooted in the Indian civilizational ethos, going back to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Before we go on to understanding the ancient Indian foundations of political thought, we need to ask ourselves as to why we should do this exercise? Why should we know the Indian civilizational underpinnings to the study of our subjects? One of the most important reasons is that the contemporary political ideas/issues/processes represent both a continuity and discontinuity, as stated by Prof V. R. Mehta. The ideas about State, relationship between State and citizen, the objectives of the State, its structure etc. as practiced today have been derived from a very progressive and radical Constitution as also from a long historical lineage of great Kings, leaders, social reformers, thinkers, ideologues whose vision shaped the idea of India. This idea has been a very assimilative inclusive one- journeying through thousand eras: across diverse cultures, religion, languages and ways of living and that is why one can see a lot of continuity in the development of the political ideas over centuries.

Secondly, every nation has his/her distinct 'identity'- who are we, where did we come from. What has been our journey so far these are questions that every people in a society ask of themselves- so that they would become aware of their history? And to develop a sense of self-esteem and belongingness.

Thirdly, a proper understanding of the contribution of our people to the knowledge system would enable us to learn from ancient ways and find pathways to maneuver the engine of the present Indian State in the proper direction to fight for a rightful place in the world order.

But how does the global world order look today? What are the challenges facing us as mankind? How are we going to face them as a collective humanity? It is here that the Indian Knowledge System which has evolved over thousands of years been a part of the nation's growth that has encountered problems, survived, developed and has passed this knowledge from generation to generation -orally, through practices or in written forms and has become the 'cultural identity' of the nation- can provide guidelines. The reason for this is that our Knowledge systems teach us to focus on the community-not just the Self; it talks of living in peace and harmony with all fellowmen and Nature, it respects the rights of others and is rooted in wisdom and truth! This system would also focus on imbibing multidisciplinary skills, on the lines of the ancient Indian Institutions like Nalanda, Takshashila etc. so as to empower the coming generation to face the complex problems of the twenty first century and solving them "the India way".

### **Indian Knowledge System in the context of Political Science**

The study of Political Science as a discipline is generally traced back to the ancient Greek period. In fact, the origin of the word 'Politics' is traced to the Greek word 'Polis' - referring to the Greek city states and so, Politics would basically denote all matters pertaining to the affairs of the city-state.

It is generally believed that Political Science was not a serious branch of knowledge in ancient India as there was no 'science of politics'. This was so stated as it was believed to have been subordinated to that of Theology or Philosophy (Mishra, 2004) However, this is not true. According to Prof Mishra, ancient Indians were aware of the important concepts relating to political life as is proved by the existence of words like Rajya, Samrajya, and Adhipatya- which are referred in ancient Texts like Atharva Veda, Taittiriya Samhita, and the Aitareya Brahman etc. Prof Ram Saran Sharma states that one does not find any definition of the State either in Vedic collection or in any law book. Dharmashastras as the State as a formal Institution had not been established. He argues that it only after the rise of well-organized States like Kosala/Magadha that the State is defined for the first time in Kautilya's Arthashastra.

While defining the State and studying about the elements of the State, from a Western perspective, one would normally refer to four elements that constitute a State, namely, fixed territory, population, government and sovereignty. However, in Kautilya's Arthashastra, the State is said to consist of seven elements, namely-*Svami*, referring to the Head in Republics/Monarchies, *Amatya*-Ministers, *Jananpada*-territory/population, *Durga*-fortress/fortified capital, *Kosa*-treasury, *Danda*-coercive power of the State and *Mitra*-ally. The *Manu Smriti*, also known as *Manudharmasmriti*, also speaks about seven elements of the State- adding three different elements- *Pura*-capital cities, *Rashtra*- kingdom and *Bala*- a standing Army. The *Santiparva* adds another element calling it-*Astangika Rajya*.

Thus, with regard to the etymology of the word-Political Science, we find changes in its name in different historical periods. The science of Politics was known as *Kshatravidya*, *Dandaniti*, *Nripashastra*, *Rajashastra*, *Arthashastra*, and *Nitishastra*. The earliest term was *Kshatravidya* and later, *Dandaniti* was used by Kautilya to describe Political Science with the growing influence of *Dharmashastras*, the word, *Rajadharma* was used and later, it gave way to *Nitishastra* or *Rajni* (Chousalkar, 2018). Sreeranjani Subba Rao has added that the science of Politics was also known as '*Drishtartha*'- so called as it suggests to interpret the world which was visible to the senses and was based on the Fifth Veda called '*Itihaasa*'. Also, with regard to the origin of Political Science in ancient India, different historical texts give different versions- out of these; two are from Mahabharata and one from Kamasutra of Vatsyayana. An authority on ancient political thought, Prof K.P. Jaiswal, has stated that the science of politics developed during the 7<sup>th</sup> century and assumed a specific form by 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

Thus, it is clear that Political Science as a formal discipline of enquiry, knowledge originated in a specific historical context in India. It was stated in the Vedic literature, Manusmriti (Chapter VII), in the Santi Parva of *Mahabharata*, in *Ramayana* and in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Therefore, this evidence is a clear indication of the origins of the subject in India and therefore, while teaching the subject at School or College level, it becomes important to bring in the rich tradition of our country.

### Theories of Origin of State in the ancient Indian Tradition

One of the fundamental questions that have generated tremendous curiosity among scholars is how did the State that has come to occupy a central position in the study of Political Science, originate? Scholarly studies by well-known Philosophers in this area have led to the rise of many theories- Divine Right Theory, Evolutionary Theory, Organic theory, Social Contract theory...to name a few. However, while studying and teaching about these theories, the context, historical phases, examples have naturally had a western context. It is, however, enlightening to note, that Indian texts too have used similar ideas to explain the origin of the State. We find four major theorizations with regard to this:

1. Evolutionary Theory 2. Force Theory 3. Organic Theory 4. Social Contract theory

The Evolutionary Theory is the oldest theory of the origin of state in India and has been mentioned in the Atharva Veda. The basic contention is that the State did not originate at a specific time but evolved gradually. Well known scholars like A.S. Altekar support this theory. Similarly, quoting from *Shanti Parva*, *Digha Nikaya*, Ram Saran Sharma shares that property, family and Varna played an important role in the evolution of the State.

The Force theory of State, as put forward by Western scholars, emphasizes the origin of the State in the subordination of the weak to the strong. It argues that, apart from being a social animal, human beings have a desire for power and therefore, the physically stronger persons captured and ruled over the weak. Professor Leacock believes that the government is the outcome of human aggression.

In the ancient Indian context, the post Mauryan times were faced with growing forces of disorder and therefore, Manu and *Shanti Parva* emphasize the use of coercive power. The use of '*Danda*' or force here, is a positive power which gives rise to the strong State to protect the

weak and act as a custodian of Dharma. Also, there is a clear guideline that while enforcing his authority, force should be exercised according to law (Sharma, 1991).

The Divine theory of State is the oldest theory regarding the origin of State-put forward by Sir Robert Filmer in the seventeenth century. He stated that God has created Nature and State for a particular end, for the purpose of peace, protection and preservation of the creatures on Earth. Since the King is God's representative on Earth, he would be able to exercise absolute power and would be above law.

In the ancient Indian tradition, the Mahabharata (*Shanti Parva*) deals with the theory of Kingship. According to the legend, people lived in an ideal state of Nature in peace and harmony. However, this State degenerated, despite many attempts to bring back the good life. Finally, the people approached Brahma, who nominated Manu as the first King. Thus, the King and laws of government are of divine origin. M.P. Singh details another narrative about the origin of Kingship in *Shanti Parva*, where too the King was consecrated by the Gods and Sages. But the role for the King was clear- he had to rule for the welfare of the people and in accordance with the Vedas. (Singh, 2019).

The Organic theory of the State is as old as political thought. Right from the time of Plato and Aristotle and through the medieval times too, the theory argues for a unity in the different parts of the State just as the parts of a body. As each part of the body is inter connected and cannot function without the other, so also the different units within a State are mutually dependent. In the Indian context, the Manusmriti too expresses the correlation of the organs. Manu uses the word '*Anga*' comparing the organs of the State to the limbs of the body and stresses the importance of the different elements in relation to the head of the State. But the theory was not taken ahead by Kautilya.

One of the central theories regarding the origin of the State is the Social Contract Theory stated in the modern times by three highly influential European philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau is of the view that a person's moral and political obligations are dependent upon a contract among them to form a society in which they live (Encyclopedia of Philosophy). It basically traces the reasons for individuals wanting to establish a State, to what extent would they accept limits on their freedom or how much authority can the State exercise over the individual?

Can we find a parallel theory to this in the ancient Indian tradition? It has been argued by Prof Ram Sharan Sharma, that some faint traces of the theory could be seen in early Brahmanical literature. However, a clear development of this theory can be found in the Buddhist canonical text Digha Nikaya. The theory goes back, like its Western counterpart, to the pre social, pre-political phase of human civilization. It was an ideal state but over a period of time, degradation set in, problems cropped up and the people decided that they needed someone who would solve their problems. They decided to choose "the best favored the most attractive and the most capable". This chief agreed to the wishes of the people to set up some kind of a system of governance to rule and came to hold in a serial order, three titles (1) *Mahasammata* (2) *Khattiya* (3) *Raja*.

According to the Text, the first meant one who is chosen by the whole people; the second meant Lord of the Fields and third meant, one who charms the people by means of Dharma. In

return for the security and peace, the people agreed to contribute a portion of their Paddy to him. One must also note that the development of the State is taking within the framework of the Varna System. This Contract too was a kind of a social contract between the Warrior Kshatriyas on the one hand and non-Kshatriyas on the other (Sharma, 1991). It also implies that the King came to power with the consent of the people, initially and was supposed to have an ethical outlook while exercising his powers. Therefore, what starts off as a practical contract of exchange /barter between the people and King, does assume an underlying moral thread to the relationship.

The second exposition of the Social Contract theory starts by describing, once again, a state of lawlessness, which brings the people together to elect Manu Vaivasvata as their king. In order to gain the protection and support of the King, they accepted the responsibility of paying 1/6<sup>th</sup> of their grain, 1/10<sup>th</sup> of their articles in addition to a portion of their gold. The tribals were also required to share 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the forest produce with the King. The King, in return, promised peace and welfare to the people.

An analysis of the 67<sup>th</sup> Chapter of *Shantiparva*, also points to the similarities to the Social Contract theory but interestingly, it adds a social contract with a political contract. The first Contract is among the people themselves, where they ostracize those who are harming others, their family members or property. The next stage is the actual formulation of a political contract, which comes in due to the failure to honor the earlier contract. The people then, approach Brahma to send a Ruler who would protect them. Thus, the origin of Kingship comes from Divine intervention. Also, the powers given to the King seem to be increasing in this phase.

Thus, much before the idea of Social Contract came to the West in the sixteenth century; the ancient Indian thinkers had given a serious thought about the reasons for the origin of the state and put forward the theory in the Buddhist texts, Kautilya's work and in the Mahabharata too.

The theory of Social Contract and also the fact that Monarchy was the prevalent political system in ancient India, leads us into the questions about the genesis of this form of government. It takes us towards a comparison of the way in which the same system originated in the West and to juxtapose our ancient system vis a vis Plato's Philosopher King and other similar discourses. The idea of Kingship is derived from four canonical Sanskrit texts- *Arthashastra*, *Manusmriti*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Shukra Nitisara*. The State is considered as an organic whole, compared to the different parts of the body, where the King is believed to be the Head i.e., the most important part of the body (Sharma & Verma, 2010).

The Sanskrit word for King is "*Rajan*", derived from the word '*Ranj*' - meaning to please. In other words, please the people by giving them good governance. It is also stated, in *Manusmriti* and *Shantiparva*, that God created the King to administer the code of laws for the benefit of the people. The difference in the origin of Kingship needs to be understood here that unlike the European tradition of heredity in the Divine Right, in the Indian context, the King is not given the right of heredity. Also, being a King does not give him absolute powers. In fact, he is limited by two important concepts-one, is law and the other is, *Rajadharma* which necessitates the essential centrality of the welfare of all beings within the Kingdom (Sharma & Nain, 2021). The idea of Law also has its roots in the ancient tradition of faith and wisdom combined with the orders of the King. Therefore, the King cannot be above Law.

Thus, the Indian concept of Kingship is based on '*Rajarshi*'- a combination of Raja and Rishi (Seer/Visionary). This implies giving priority to the people over Self and promoting Yogakshema i.e., successful accomplishments of one's objectives and its peaceful enjoyment too (Sirswal, 2015).

The discussions about the ideas of Kingship have been elucidated with great detailing in Kautilya's Arthashastra, in Bhishma's Discourses in the *Shantiparva*, in *Ramayana* - where the fundamental premise of a King's rule is '*Prajahit*' is reiterated, with the upholding of '*Dharma*'. However, one must note and understand that the political, social, economic context of each historical epoch of these Treatises has led to a modification, as deemed, by the great philosophers, seers, scholars, of the role of the King.

This Paper is a very basic, humble and small attempt to understand and integrate the concepts, theories in Political Science with the Indian Knowledge System of the subject. Political Science is one of the oldest, comprehensive disciplines, with many sub disciplines in its ambit. Suffice to say that many more of these concepts, institutions, and processes would find their Indic roots through a deeper understanding of our ancient Texts- for example the concepts of Welfare State, Democracy, Sovereignty, Justice, Political Obligation, Administration, diplomacy, foreign policy etc.

One must acknowledge the debt of the pioneering work of research done in this area to K.P. Jayaswal, U.N. Ghoshal, D.R. Bhandarkar, Beni Prasad, N.C. Bhattacharya and many more. Despite the path breaking work done by these scholars, it is true that most of our ancient Texts like Vedas, Dharmashastras, Mahabharata, and Ramayana have been categorized as primarily religious or philosophical texts and therefore, have been ignored as serious academic works.

However, the National Education Policy 2020 is set to bring about a fundamental transformation in the structure and content of the curriculum to be offered at the Higher Education level. The emphasis on bringing in the Indian Knowledge System in the Curriculum framing is seen as an important step in educating the students about the rich contribution of their own people in the respective subject matter. Also, as is believed, the main function of education is to build up citizens who are proud of their heritage, rooted in their Indic culture and philosophy and learning skills to face the concerns of the new era. What are the problems that we look at in the twenty first century? Globally, environmental concerns, terrorism, growing inequality, poverty, intolerance, polarization of societies and at the individual level lack of civic citizen values, materialistic interests, self-centrism glare at us. How do we go ahead? The Indian Knowledge System is after all experiential spiritual wisdom which gives to us a vision, grounded in our history- it teaches us to reflect, enquire research and develop critical thinking abilities. It will develop in the young generation values of inclusion, tolerance, respect for diversity and respect for Nature to help build up sustainable societies.

Having said this, one needs to add a word of caution while bringing in the Indian Knowledge system and that is with regard to both words- 'Indian' and 'System'. In a country with a diverse populace, cultural historical legacies, it must be ensured that all Indian practices, texts theories, ideas will be included. Also, the idea of what constitutes 'knowledge' should not be discriminating or privileging some vis a vis the other. Therefore, in the inclusion of IKS in the curricula of Social Science, we may need to think of 'systems' rather than a 'system'.

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