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Ancient Indian political thought: A critical appraisal

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Abstract

Indian Political thinking, one of the most developed political thoughts, represents the East in the history of political thought. A study of Indian Political thought is very much necessary to understand Indian Political problems. The Western Political thought, as represented by the researchers from the West and the Indian researchers looking through the spectacles of the Western Political thought, has more than often missed the real spirit of Political concepts of India. The Western concepts are not relevant in the analysis of the problems of Indian Political system. We cannot, for example, understand Indian Political Philosophy by comparing Machiavelli to Chanakya. Indian Political thinkers, ancient, modern and contemporary, have developed some indigenous tools and concepts which are very much necessary to understand Indian society and social institutions.

The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagwad Gita etc. represents significantly the ancient Indian Political thinking. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Manusmriti along with other smritis dealt with entire Panorama of human life vertically and horizontally. The result of the vertical perspective led to the concept of the State. The Horizontal perspective led to the concept of Dharma. Both the concepts of State and Dharma constitute the backbone of the Indian Political thought. This paper will try to focus on political philosophy of Bhagwat Gita, political philosophy of Mahabharata, Political philosophy of Ramayana, Political thought in the Manusmriti, Political philosophy of Arthashastra and evolution from Puranas to Nitishastras.

Thus, this paper will look into the importance of ancient political thinking, its evolution. Moreover, how ancient political thinking and its understanding is a must for analyzing problems of Indian Society in particular and the World in general.

Keywords: Mahabharat, Ramayana, ancient political thinking, Arthasashtra, Bhagbatgita

Introduction

Political Thought, Eastern or Western, has been a subject of tremendous significance right from the days of my Graduation. This is due to the fact that Political thought is the only paper which is very difficult to comprehend in the minds of the students. A student of Political Science and thereafter a teacher for so many years, I find it interesting and challenging. Political Thought, for most of its part, has been dominated by Western Political thought. Greek Philosophers Plato and Aristotle, social contractualists like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and J.J. Rousseau; modern philosopher Nicollo Machiavelli; utilitarian philosopher like Jeremy Bentham; representative philosopher like John Stuart Mill; idealistic philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and communist philosophers like Karl Marx and Lenin etc. continues to dominate the curriculum and minds of the students and teachers of Political science. The Western Political thought, as represented by political philosophers from the West and the Indian researchers. Looking through the spectacles of the Western Political Thought, have generally missed the real spirit of Indian Political concepts. Moreover, the western political thinking have failed to provide solutions to the global problems of human civilization. Time, has therefore, come to take note of the global failure of the Western Political thinking.

Indian Political thinking, on the other hand, is one of the most developed political thinking in the history of Political Thought. Indian Political Thought ancient, modern or contemporary, have developed some indigenous tools and concepts which are very much essential to understand the social institutions and political concepts of India. A thorough understanding of the political concepts of the prominent political thinkers is absolutely necessary for a proper analysis of the political scenes of today. An understanding of the manner in which the Indian Political ideas were adopted from time to time by the different political thinkers and their impact on the political action of the people will always be the guiding principles

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for the people of the World in general and people of India in particular for all ages, past, present and future. Now, time has come to look into the possibilities of relevance of these concepts or models of Indian political thinkers at global level as an alternative. India, like ancient Greece developed a political thought in ancient times. Indian political thought is one of the most developed political thoughts in the East for the World. An understanding of the political problems of India can be possible only by the study of Indian Political Thought. In other words, the prevalent political concepts of the world cannot be relevant for analyzing political problems of Indian Polity. We cannot for example, perfectly understand Indian Political Philosophy by comparing Gandhi to Marx or Chanakya to Machiavelli.

Evolution of ancient Indian political thought

The Western Scholars, sometimes, one of the opinion that the ancient Indian Political thought made no contribution of Max Muller and Prof. Bloomfield is worth mentioning in this regard. Max Muller, a German Scholar pointed out "the only sphere where the Indian mind found itself at liberty to act, to create and to worship was the sphere of religion and philosophy." He further say, "Nowhere have religious and metaphysical ideas struck root so deep in the mind of a nation as in India. The Hindus were a nation of Philosophers... Taken as a whole, history supplies no second instance where the inward Life of the some has some completely absorbed all the practical faculties of a whole people, and, in fact, almost destroyed those qualities of which a nation gains its place history." Bloomfield also pointed out "From the beginning of India's history, religious institutions controlled the character and development of its people to an extent unknown elsewhere.... There is no provision in such a scheme for the interest of the state and the development of the race". Even Dunning, a Western Scholar, once said, "The Oriented Aryans never freed their political from the theological environment in which it is embedded today. Therefore, he was compelled to limit his study to the philosophy of the European People."

But, on the other hand, Indian Scholars like Dr. B.R. Bhandarkar and Dr. Beni Prasad had different views. Prof. U.N. Ghosal, N.D. Palmer and important Western Scholar like D. Mackenzie Brown etc. also can be bracketed in this category.

According to Dr. B.R. Bhandarkar, "it is absurd to affirm that Indian had subordinated the study of science of politics to that of Theology and Philosophy and had never developed it as an independent branch of knowledge." He is of the opinion that the Hindu mind showed equal regard to the science-making or material progress or spiritual culture at the time of Kautilya. Prof. K.N. Ghosal is of the opinion that the Hindus belong to the category of people who have left their impression upon the pages of History as the founders of original systems of political thought.

According to N.D. Palmer, "Ancient Indian Political thought deals with many subjects which have bulked large in political theory of the western world. Among these are the nature and origin of the state, types of status, the relation of state and society the forms of Govt., the origin of Kingship, the duties of Kingship, the duties of Kings, royal authority and its limitations, power politics, diplomacy and administration, state of nature, the social contact and sovereignty possibly even international level, conflicting theories of international relations can be found in ancient

Indian thought as well as in the modern world. As for example, the doctrine of the 'Mandela group of states' was a kind of Hindu theory of balance of power. Moreover, the doctrine of 'Sarvahapaurma' in similar to modern theories of World Federation or a World State. It is interesting to note that D. Mackenzie Brown, a Western Scholar, in his book, "The White Umbrella" paid glorious tribute to the realm of Political thought beginning from the East and not from the West and Political Science beginning from India and not from Greece.

All these claims and counter claims makes the study of ancient Indian Political thought more challenging and interesting.

Features

The following are the salient features of ancient Indian Political Thought.

- According to B.A. Saletore, one of the important features of ancient political thought is the continuity of political thought of the earlier writers by the late political thinkers. This gave a totality and continuity to the subject of ancient Indian Political Thought.
- The ancient Indian Political Thought is a product of Northern India, the home of Indo-Aryan Culture. It may be pointed out that the Dravidian races of the South had no significant contribution to the ancient Indian Political Thought.
- Religion, ethics and moral values constitutes the essence of ancient political thinking. The king and the priest had good relations and worked in mutual co-operation.
- Another important features of ancient Indian Political Thought was that it was realistic and practical by nature. It consisted of political ideas which were worldly and based on the accumulated wisdom of the past. They laid down such policies which the rulers could observe in practice.
- The political ideas of the ancient Indian Political thinkers was largely influenced by the monarchical states of the Northern India.
- The ancient Indian Political Thought was both conservative and static. This nature is traceable from the fact that their political thinking justified caste systems and even inferior rank of the sudras.
- Politics, according to ancient political thinking, was closely linked with other branches of human activities. Politics was not treated as an isolated or exclusive subject of study.
- Ruling classes and priests, according to the ancient Indian Political thinkers, were at the top of the social hierarchy. They enjoyed several privileges. As for example, the persons and property of the priests were to be protected and exempted from taxation and capital punishment. But the priestly class's privileges were withdrawn later on. Kautilya, the author of Arthasasthra, excluded them from the list of component factors (Angas) of Government (rajyam).

Development

The Development of ancient Indian Political thought can be traced back to the Rigveda Samhita. It describes the existence of a tribal society in which the government of each tribal unit was vested in the monarch (Rajan). The rajan was checked by the tribal assemblies like sabha or

samiti. The Vedic samhitas or the Brahmins also describe the position of Vedic King, who enjoyed limited powers. Moreover, the Vedic Literature contains the seeds of social contract theory relating to the origin of state. The Vedic samhitas and Brahmins also refer to the origin of the four classes. The Vedic literature also expounded the concept of Law (Dharma).

Besides the Vedic literature, some other scholars also made contribution to the development of ancient Indian Political thought. Unfortunately, these writings have mostly perished. However, we find some references of their views in the later Brahminical Canon and Arthashastra. Kautilya talks of thirteen authors and four different schools in his work. Kamandaka adds some more which were not given by Kautilya. All these are proof of the fact that there was literature available on ancient Indian Political Thought even before Kautilya. But, it is true that the ancient Indian Political Thought and institutions began to be studied systematically only with Kautilya. However, Manu also made some valuable contributions to the development of ancient Indian political thought.

Sources of ancient Indian political thought

Ancient Indian Political Thought is not available in any single source or work. In other words they are scattered in different areas like social, religious and others. However, the main sources of ancient Indian Political Thought are the following:

- Vedas
- Mahabharata
- Smritis
- Kumandakiya Nitisara
- Compilations by Hindu Lawyers.

We may briefly analyze the above sources of ancient Indian Political Thought.

Political thought of Bhagwad gita

The Bhagwad Gita is known as the easily communicable form of the essence of the Upanishads. In the eighteen chapters of the Gita, Sri Krishna put forward different arguments to convince Arjuna about his duties and their fulfillment without any regard for the result. Lord Krishna made a detailed analysis of man, nature and God which is the base of the spiritualism of the Upanishads. According to the Bhagwad Gita, the most important objective of human beings is the realization of God or consolidation of society. Consolidation of society is an ideal for human beings. By relating it with the realization of God, it is clear that highest significance has been attached to it. This ideal can be attained through knowledge, devotion or action. These three identical paths are related to the three aspects of human personality – cognitive, conative or affective. The Bhagwad Gita describes an ideal individual as “Sthetapragya”. Gita also provides a harmonious combination of the individual freedom and social harmony in the Bhagwad Gita has three aspects, namely, metaphysical, sociological and psychological.

Vedas

The Vedas, a work on religious and philosophy, is also a source of information about the political institutions. It provides information about the various Kingdoms, and their organization, duties of the Kings towards the subjects,

references about the political like Sabha and Samiti

- References about the political institutions like Sabha and Samiti.
- Idea about the institution of monarchy as a form of Govt.
- The idea that moral upliftment of the people as the basis of the political institution.

Mahabharat

Vyasa is a mythical figure. He is popularly regarded as a compiler and arranger of great epic Mahabharat. Vyasa in course of the compilation of the Mahabharat, described various principles relating to the science of polity known as Rajadharma, Dandaniti (criminal justice), origin of the State, Kingship, the authority and obligation of the rulers, principles and policies of government, judicial administration, ministers, the treasury, defence etc. Mahabharata is another important source of ancient Indian Political Thought. It gives the following information about the Indian Polity.

- Discussion about the various theories of origin of State and Kingship.
- Discussion about the duties of the King.
- Discussion on the responsibilities of the ministers.
- Information about the method of war and rules of conducting the war.
- Information about the earlier political thinkers and their ideas.

Smritis

Manu was one of the great ancient Indian Political Philosophers. He is famous for his monumental work “Manusmriti”. He is regarded in one of the first and foremost thinkers who gave ideas about structures, norms, standards and values of society, religion and polity. His political ideas are still relevant for modern world. He laid the foundations of social and political organizations of ancient Indian Civilization. Manu’s Political ideas are found in the realm of the Origin of State, the role and qualities of Kingship, Dandaniti, diplomacy and other administrative aspects. Smritis (sacred traditions) are also a source of ancient Indian Political Thought in the sense that we get an idea about the changing position of the King and ethical basis of the State.

Arthashastra

Kautilya, otherwise known as Chanakya, or Vishnugupta was one of the most pragmatic Political thinkers of the Ancient India. His magnum opus “Arthashastra” is the basis of his pragmatic political theory. The Arthashastra of Kautilya has been divided into fifteen books or Adhikaranas. The first book discusses about monarchy the King and his duties, the ministers, priests etc. The second book deals with bureaucracy and its structure and the management of different department. The third book deals with Civil Laws relating to marriage, inheritance, Sale and Purchase etc. The fourth book deals with Criminal Law and Punishment. The fifth book deals with the Conduct of Courtiers subsistence to Government servants, filing up of the treasury etc. The sixth book discusses element of kingdom, internal peace attributes of the King, ministers courtiers etc. The seventh book talks about War, Peace, neutrality, treaty, defence, forts etc. The eighth book discusses about issues concerning King and his subjects,

natural calamities, army and friendly state. The ninth book talks about internal and external dangers, enemies, traitors, strengths and weaknesses etc. The tenth book discusses about War, infantry, Cavalry, elephants etc. In the Eleventh book, there are topics like Punishment, causes of dissension, secret punishment etc. The twelfth book discusses about battle of intrigue, duties of messengers, destruction of stores, granaries etc. The thirteenth book deals with creating dissensions in the enemy's army with the spies, peace on the occupied territories, etc. The fourteenth book has discussion what ways and means of injuring army remedies against injuries etc. The fifteenth book deals with the plan of Logical arrangement of the treatise. Arthasashtra is the most authoritative source of the ancient Indian Political Thought. The following information are the contribution of Arthasashtra.

- Duties and responsibilities of the King.
- The Principles of foreign policy
- The type of army
- Kind of taxes collected by the state and method of their collection.

According to Prof. Altekar, "The position of Arthasashtra in the realm of Literature on Politics is analogous to that of Panini's Ashadhyayi in the field of grammar."

Thus, Arthasashtra is one of the most exhaustive treaties on the part of Govt.

Kumundakiya Nitisara

Kumundakiya Nitisara, a treatise written in 500 A.D., in primarily a summary of Kautilya's Arthasashtra. But it also provides information about the King and his family.

Compilations of Hindu lawyers

A number of Hindu Lawyers, in the period between 14th and 18th Centuries, compiled certain treatise which lay scattered in different sources, some of the most important writers who produced such works are Nibandhakaras Chandesvara Mitra Mishra and Nilakantha. The value of these works lies in the fact that they contain extracts from unknown authorities.

Political philosophy of Bhagwad gita

The most important teaching of Gita is the devotion to one's own duties in society and performance of social service.

Political philosophy of Mahabharata

Mahabharata, the great epic, can also be treated as ancient Indian Political Literature. The most important parts, from the political view point, the Mahabharat is the Shantiparva in which a theory of punishment is advanced as a political theory or the service of government. Indian thinkers have regarded the power of punishment (Danda) as the chief characteristic of the State. According to the Shantiparva in Mahabharata, Vishnu first created a monumental text on life and adman and then established a king, govt. and a state. Vishnu's text on political science mentioned in the Mahabharata gives an account of the rules pertaining to governance by the state and rules governing relations between states. In the Mahabharata, we find the following political ideas.

- They are the origin of the state
- Patriotism of the people to the state
- The Mahabharata consistently supports the

decentralized state

- The Mahabharata supports democracy in practice.

Political philosophy of Ramayan

The Ramayan also provides important insights into ancient Indian Political thought. The vision of an ideal state presented in the Ramayan has been important aspect of Indian Political thinking from ancient times till today. The ideal concept of Ram Rajya has been a source of constant inspiration to Indian Political thought from the period of Ramayan till the present day.

Political thought in the Manusmriti

The epic period was succeeded by the period of the Smritis. The most important among these Smritis in the Manusmriti. The Manusmriti provides valuable concepts of Political Science like Justice, Law and Education. The fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth Chapters of Manusmriti are the most important. Manu, in the seventh chapter, indulged in a suitable analysis of the various aspects of the state. First of all, the duties of the King are elaborately discussed. Other Organs of the state like ministers, diplomats or ambassadors, heads of villages etc. have been considered in details. Manu has provided a very detailed picture of the various aspects a King's life and duties. The eight chapter of Manusmriti provide, a detailed analysis of the system of Justice.

Political philosophy of Arthashastra

Kautilya's Arthashastra is the most important text on ancient Indian Political Thought. It provides a detailed analysis of every aspect of a Welfare State. Arthasashtra also regards dharma as the foundation stone of the state as well as relations between states. Kautilya has supported the theory of Divine origin of state.

Evolution from Puranas to Niti-shastras

Political ideas are to be found in the 18 Puranas between 5 to 10 A.D. These Puranas are Agni Purana, Vayu Purana, Markendiyia Purana, Mastsya Purana, Vrahnardiyia Purana, Padma Purana, Varaha Purana, Narasingha Purana, Koorma Purana and Srimad Bhagvada.

Buddhist and Jain texts

Buddhist and Jain thinking clearly exhibits notable features of Indian Political Thought. Jain and Buddhist scholars preached the equality of man in human society. Buddhist and Jain thinkers revolted against discrimination and taught the principle of human equality sutralankara, a Buddhist text provides a detailed account of the skills which a prince must necessarily possess.

Niti shastras

Political ideas are to be found in texts called Niti Shastras. The most important among them are Niti Shastra of Kumandaka, 'Shukranti' etc.

Short comings of ancient Indian political thought

The ancient Indian Political thought suffered from a number of weaknesses, some of the important among them are given below.

- The Writers of ancient Indian Political thought were much influenced by schools and systems. The Vedic theological schools, schools of the sacred Tradition

(Smriti) schools of the Buddhist Canons and Arthashastra etc. had significant influence upon the scholars of ancient Indian Political thought. This resulted in lack of original thinking in the mind of authors. What is distressing is that sometimes their ideas are even full of ambiguities.

- Another problem with regard to ancient political thought is chronology or lack of chronological order. There are different views regarding the dates of different writings. As for example, there are three dates starting from 3rd Century to 7th Century AD. Regarding the political treaties of Kamandaka. Consequently, it is problematic to relate time to the theories of ancient Indian Political Thought.
- Still another problem of ancient Indian political thought is the lack of consensus regarding the meaning of different terms and roles of various political institutions. As for example, different scholars have assigned different meanings to different terms like Dandaniti, dharmaniti, Dharma, Rajniti, Samiti, Sabha etc. It is extremely difficult for an average student to understand these terms. The problem still continues even with the modern scholars who have not yet been able to root out this problem.

Conclusion

The ancient Indian Political thought is one of the most developed political thought not only in India but all over the World. Unfortunately, this fact has not been well recognized. There are multiple reasons for this. First, the ancient Indian Political Thought has not been properly codified. Efforts has not been properly made to define codify and outline the scope of the study of ancient Indian Political Thought. It is urgently necessary that the political ideas of ancient political philosophers should be properly analysed and their importance for Indian Politics should be emphasized. Moreover, their philosophy may also be used for solving global problems. The ancient Indian Political Thought and its philosophers needs reintroduction into the totality of Political thought so that they can claim rightful place in the history of Political thought.

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