

Innovations

Philosophical Contemplation of Ancient Indian Socio-Political Conviction

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Abstract: *The ancient Indian socio-political thoughts have a 'preeminently ethical motive. It accepts some fundamental ethical principles and assumes that they ought to direct social and political organizations. The social and political thoughts become the ethics of whole society, a science of the whole duty of man in all its relations and environment. The entire compass of Indian ethics, which sought to guide the social and political institutions, is expressed by the term Dharma. Its function was to enforce the moral codes of society and to enforce justice among men. According to Indian political philosophy state and government are essential for the civilized life of man. They are essential for saving men from their own evil tendencies and for the protection of Dharma.*

Key Words: *Adharma, Artha, Dharma, Kama, Gunas, Matsynyaya, Moksa, Punarjanma, Varna*

Introduction

The Ancient Indian State might be considered as Hindu State was based on religious and spiritual foundations. It must not, however, be assumed that the ancient Hindu state was a theocracy, even though it had a religious orientation. It was a secular institution meant to regulate the social life of man according to the principles of justice. No undue prominence to the sacerdotal character of the state was given¹, though it was expected and assumed that the state would not go against religion, rather it must maintain Dharma.

Dharma, Varna and Purusartha

“The social and political thoughts become the ethics of whole society, a science of the whole duty of man in all its relations and environment.” ² The entire compass

of Hindu ethics, which sought to guide the social and political institutions, is expressed by the term Dharma. The *raison d'être* of the state was the promotion of Dharma by making 'artha' and 'kama' subservient to it. The political and social institutions were established to deal with the problem of the fulfillment of 'artha' and 'kama' according to the principles of Dharma³.

Thus, Dharma was the most fundamental concept of the Hindu political theory. It was thought that the state was an organ of Dharma and as such it was subordinate to it (Dharma) and it could never transgress its (Dharma's) limits. The "Dharma was not only the justification of the state but its ultimate cause and support."⁷ Thus the purpose of the state was ethical throughout. Its function was "to enforce the moral codes of society and to enforce justice among men".⁴

As Dharma had its ramifications in the social doctrine of varnasrama dharma, the state was supposed to guarantee and promote it as well. The state was an institution for the advancement of culture and justice; it was expected to elevate man out of "the law of beasts" by the enforcement of the duties of every individual and class. The society is not an amorphous mass of atomic individuals but an organized association of people who should perform their respective duties ordained by their nature, capacity and character as determined by the varnasrama system. It is supposed that if people are to constitute a society, every member of society must observe a system of discipline and duty- his svadharma--, in absence of which there is reservation to anarchy or matsynyaya where none is safe and happy. "Varnasrama, though obvious by an ethical-economic and socio-pedagogic term, is thus fundamentally a political concept. It is an indispensable category in an organic theory of state." Varnasrama is the application of the doctrine of Dharma to the social life of the state to be followed by its members. "The doctrine of Varnasrama is then clearly an integral part in a consistent philosophy of politics."⁵ And the Varnasrama Dharma is the sine qua non of human welfare; its preservation is the first duty of the government. The foundation of this Varnasrama institution lays the idea of 'function', which forms the governing principles of Hindu social life. The Hindu thought is based on the 'law of functionalism', which is extended to social organization also. The Hindu theory "erected functions into an ethical principle." The individual is not to seek his own interest alone, but has to fulfill the function assigned to him by the social whole of which he forms a part. The concept of society, therefore, develops into an organism concept according to which the society is conceived as an organism of which the individual is but a part, and he must fulfill the tasks assigned to him according to his nature, nurture and heredity. His individual self, apart from the society and the Varna to which he is assigned, has no significance.

In this exaltation of the society and the varna system, some of the human values are, no doubt, lost and much that is personal is made to give way to collective elements; but on the whole it works for a settled, ordered and organized life of the society undisturbed by the competitiveness and selfishness of the individuals. The Varna theory is substantiated and justified by the theory of 'karma' and 'punarjanma', which takes the sting out of it and make it philosophically acceptable.

The individual is to remain satisfied with his lot and do the duty assigned to him. "Thus, the duty of the individual is a social duty, his good is the good of society, and his virtue is the virtue of society. The individual and society become one in moral purpose... The antithesis, man versus state or society, could not have occurred to Hindu mind."

Triguna, Matsyanyaya and Dandaniti

According to Hindu political philosophy state and government are essential for the civilized life of man. They are essential for saving men from their own evil tendencies and for the protection of Dharma, which creates the condition of civilization in society⁶. This concept of the inevitability of the State accrues from the very psychology and nature of man. Man is constituted of the three gunas of 'sattva', 'rajasa' and 'tamasa'. In everyman, therefore, there are some evil tendencies, which need suppression and sublimation. The 'tamasic' element in men makes them avaricious, greedy, selfish and violent, and thus leads them to fall out among themselves. For protecting men from these evil tendencies state and government are essential.

The state, which is the embodiment of Danda, maintains law and order by checking the evil activities of men. It is because of the fear of punishment, which is meted out by the state that men observe the laws of Dharma, and each individual is able to enjoy his life and property and remain at peace with others. In the absence of Danda (institutionalised in state and government) the evil or 'tamas' in men will predominate making peace and order impossible. The coercive power of the state is essential to fight the matsyanyayika tendencies of men. The Mahabharata says that it Dandaniti, which leads men to the performance of their duties and makes them desist from adharma.

According to Kamandaka⁷ men are by nature subject to passions and covetousness. It is through the fear of Danda, observes Mahabharata that people are kept in order and are made to observe the rules of social behavior Good men are rare¹⁶ and others, not being so, would not very willingly forgo their selfish desires and activities. The ancient Indian political philosophy fundamentally assumes that there are some inherent tendencies in men which left to themselves, will lead them towards the 'law of the fish' (matsynyaya), which is the very antithesis of civilized life.

Hence the state is a necessity originating from the very psychology of men. Thus, as Dr. Mukherji has pointed out, the "starting point of Hindu political philosophy is the basically selfish nature of man admitting at the same time the possibility of rare souled persons who can rise above the selfish interests, and promote the common welfare."⁸ The state is brought into existence to check human vices and evil tendencies. It comes into existence to fulfill the desire of man for security, peace and social order in which he can live in peace and enjoy the fruits of his own labor and not be subjected to matsyanyaya. It (the state) is essential for curbing the selfish nature of man. The vicious and corrupt human nature makes state a necessity.

It does not, however, mean that the Hindu social thinkers conceived of man as totally egoistic and selfish. They conceived that along with the 'tamasa' and 'rajasa', which lead men to fall out among them, there is also the 'sattva' tendency in him, which leads him to the path of Dharma and makes him virtuous. The task of the state is to check the evil tendencies of 'rajasa' and 'tamasa' and promote the satvika tendencies in him, which make him altruistic and righteous. Thus, the ancient Indian thinkers had a complete view of human nature, which is the combination of the three gunas. They realized the necessity of law and regulation and also the institutions of state and government to enforce them for upholding the order of society.

The state is, according to them, the divine for curbing the vicious human nature, as depicted in the conditions of matsyanyaya, and promoting the 'sattva' in men. So long as men are subject to selfish desires, anger, greed and violent nature, so long as they adopt immoral means for the fulfillment of their selfish desires, the Danda would be essential to check them and with it also the institution of state to uphold it. Left to them, men would devour one another.

Saptanga, Rajadharma and Rajanyaya

In ancient Indian political thought, we do not find any clear –cut distinction between society, state and government. Indian thinkers conceive of a social order which has the government as its agency through which it enforces its will, “but the very insistence on these two concepts prevented them from formulating the idea of the state as distinct from either.... The concept of the state does not emerge very clearly and ‘government’ is used in the sense which the state conveys in modern times.”⁹ We do not find the existence of a theoretical concept of the State in ancient India.

The ancient Indian political theorists had, no doubt, “the conceptual formulation of some of the elements that compose the state”, but they did not have that “one single concept that could connote in an abstract way what the term state connotes”¹⁰. The state for them was merged in the social order. But in spite of the fact that the conceptual formulation of the State could not evolve in ancient India, it does not mean the historical non-existence of the institution of the state. ‘Rajya’ is the term, which is generally used as the Indian equivalent for state. It is derived from the same root as the word ‘raja’ and etymologically implies ‘that which pertains to king’. It is generally used in the sense of ‘kingdom’.

The Indian thinkers conceived of this ‘rajya’ or ‘kingdom’ as having seven elements,¹¹ but in spite of this saptangika formulation of ‘rajya’, the term ‘rajya’ is not fully identical with the modern term of state. We, therefore, conclude that in ancient India there was “no very clear-cut idea of the state in the sense in which that word is used in western political thought”. Basham¹² is of opinion that ancient Indians deserve praise rather than blame on that account because ‘that state’ “has no real existence except as an abstraction in the minds of political theorists and as a rather more portentous synonym of ‘government’ in the speeches of politicians. Perhaps

Europe has gone astray too often in the past by attributing an illusory reality to such abstract entities.”

It should be born in mind that the term state is a modern term used only in modern times. It is a “post feudal societal phenomenon”¹³. The concept of state is also a modern concept. “The era of the State begins with the dawn of Nationalism and Protestantism. The polities of earlier historical epochs were not States even in their theoretical bearings.”¹⁴ The ‘polis’ of the Greeks was different from nation-states of today. The Greeks never distinguishes with sufficient clearness between ‘societies and ‘state’ and their politics was more than a political institution. It was the focus of religious, social, artistic as well as political life. The politics was simultaneously a government, a state, a society and a community¹⁵.

Hence, the ancient Indian science of politics was mainly not the science of state but kingship—rajadharma. The delineation of state was in reality the delineation of kingship. As such, in ancient Indian science of politics the main stress was laid on the king. Kautilya goes even to the extent of declaring the ‘the king is the state-*raja rajnyam iti prakrti samksepa*’¹⁶. In works of ancient Indian science of politics, we come across the discussions of the duties, qualities and the character mainly of the king. He is the center of ancient Indian politics¹⁷. He is the spirit and soul of the state and the pivot round which the whole machinery of the state moves¹⁸.

Swamitva, ksemaand Dharma

The most important characteristic of the modern State is the concept of sovereignty and it is the most stressed aspect of the State in modern times. But the ancient Indian concept of the State was not sovereignty- oriented rather it was agency oriented. It was an institution for serving some of the common interests of men in society. The state, according to ancient Indian thinkers, was the agent of moral society created for the moral purpose, for the promotion of Dharma or justice. Its power was limited by Dharma. It could not transgress it. It is true that sovereignty (swamitva) or monopoly of legal coercion (Danda) is one of the important elements of the ancient Indian State and the Danda or the coercive power of the State has received high eulogies from Hindu political philosophers. “But the limited purpose for which the stately coercion was permissible is also clearly stated by them viz. the purpose of keeping the people within the bounds of dharma or moral life.”¹⁹

The state or government i.e. the king was always under the obligation to observe Dharma. The coercive power at the disposal of the sovereign was to be exercised not arbitrarily, but in accordance with the strict provisions of Dharma. “The authority to exercise Danda is derived by the sovereign from the society and limited by society’s conception of dharma and justice.” It was the societal and moral order which was omnipotent and not the state or government. The Dharma limited the power of the government. It was the king of kings. With the government, no doubt, rested the “ultimate power of adjusting social relations but the adjustment must proceed according to Dharma.”

The Hindu political philosophy does not conceive of state as only the 'hindrance of hindrance'. It was not negative in character but played a positive role of moral regeneration by maintaining Dharma. It was not only a political institution but also a moral and cultural one, which consciously and actively stimulated virtue, guided the moral life and looked to the welfare of the citizens. The ancient Indians conceived of the State "as a general welfare agency of society" to ensure yoga and ksema (security and welfare) to the people and remove their sins. Thus, the ancient Indian State was interested in maintaining peace and order in society, in promoting material prosperity of the people, in developing cultural and religious life and also in furthering morality and virtue in men.

Though ancient Indian thinkers dived very deep in metaphysical discussions, there is not much of serious discussion on the fundamental problems of political philosophy. The literature that deals with politics is didactic in nature, abounding in sermons and manuals 'substantiated by myths and legendry instances.' We do not find that logical and philosophical argumentation in Indian political thinkers does not go "to the depths which Plato and Aristotle reached".

Further, as a criticism of ancient Indian political philosophy, it may be said that it was so much associated with Dharma and its social manifestations, the Varna vyavastha, which assumed a hereditary character and which gave rise to social privileges and inequality "but trussed by the metaphysics on the one hand and the dogma of heredity on the other" that the political philosophy of ancient India tended to exalt the status quo and privileges of castes.

Anjaria²⁰ seems to be, to a great extent, right in his remark that "the conception of dharma has been taken to sanctify the existing social order with all the inequity that is implied in the hierarchical arrangement... Instead of making an attempt to actualize the ideal and translate the ideals in institutional terms, the actual had been idealized. Such an attitude makes inevitably for conservatism and kills the spirit of critical examination. There is to be no analysis of the very foundation of the social order. By connecting the state with dharma, the distinction between the actual and the Ideal is ignored and the state is placed beyond the range of criticism."

Thus, the philosophical conviction of ancient Indians socio-political conviction conceived that state is a general welfare agency of society to ensure yoga and ksema (security and welfare) to the people and remove their sins. The ancient Indian State was interested in maintaining peace and order in society, in promoting material prosperity of the people, in developing cultural and religious life and also in furthering morality and virtue in men.

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