Political Thought and institutions in Ancient India

We are justifiably proud of the great strides India made in ancient times in the realms of religion and philosophy, literature and art. But India's achievements in the field of politics have been no less remarkable. We had well governed states, we had elaborate political treatises containing gems of political wisdom, we had a long time of illustrious kings whose virtuous conduct and glorious deeds are still recounted.

Like other sciences and arts, the science of politics is also considered to be divine in origin in ancient Indian political thought. It is known by various terms Arthashastra, Nitishastra, Danda Niti, Nrip shastra etc. vaishalaksha or lord Shiva is regarded as the first exponent of the principles of politics. Lord Shiva is regarded, in tradition, as the author of a treatise on Rajdharma which contained ten thousand chapters. Later on, this gigantic treatise was abridged by Indra or Bahudantak, Brihaspati and Shkra. All Later treatises on politics derive their fundamental principles from these divine or semi-divine sources. This tradition of political thought was enriched by valuable contributions of Manu, Kautilya, Kamandaka, Lalhan, Chandeshwar, Anant Dev, Mitra Mishra, Neelkanth, etc. It is important to note that right upto 19th century large number of kingdoms in the various parts of India were being governed on the basis of the principles expounded in above-mentioned texts even though India had lost her independence.
after the advent of Muslim rule and later on the British rule. Thus we can say that there is a remarkable continuity in the development of ideas concerning state and government. Then there are breaks as when Islam entered India or western culture came in. But in these periods also, particularly in the medieval period, there were attempts to combine earlier ideas with Islam. But with the advent of the British, a new political Indian emerged and took hold of the minds of the people.

The ancient thinkers regarded Politics as part and parcel of the Dharma or the Cosmic Law. Dharma is the ultimate sovereign because It binds kings as well as the people. Politics is not independent or autonomous; it is subordinate and subservient to the ethical ends. Politics has an instrumental value; state and government find their utility and dignity insofar as they help men and women in attaining Artha and kama and finally the ultimate end- Moksha. In ancient Greece, the renowned philosophers Socrates, Plats and Aristotle also regarded state as a means of 'good life'. Thus ancient thinkers emphasized a close relationship between ethics and politics.

In ancient India, two types of polity are bound- monarchies and republics or quasi republics. The former represented the dominant type and not only absorbed the latter but themselves were actually merged into a single empire. The remarkable advance in the composition and functions of the monarchic states is illustrated in such branches as the structure of the centre government, economic
organisation, finance, justice and Law, military organisation, inter-state relations etc. The republics developed their most interesting institution of popular assemblies with their distinctive rules of business procedure.

Political thought of ancient India expounds the theory of the seven organs of state or 'llrkax'. These seven organs of state are-king, council of ministers, nation (Rastra or Janpada), Capital or Fort (Durg), Treasury or Kosh, Army or Bala and friendly states or Mitra.

The King is credited with supreme executive, judicial and military authority, and his ruling power is indicated by vedic technical terms such as Iswara, adhipati and swami. The king is the essential unit of social order, as without a king there would be anarchy in which order would perish, the strong would devour the weak, none would be able to perform his obligations and live a happy existence. The main duty of the king is to protect the good and punish the wicked. He must remove the thorns in the path of good life. Shukra says that a good king combines in himself the attributes of seven persons father, mother, teacher, brother, friend, kubera and yama. A strong king has been favoured by ancient thinkers but not an absolute or arbitrary one. A long list of dos and don'ts is prescribed. The king must shun vices and passions as these will take him away from the path of duty. A king should act according to the dictates of Dharma, a king who disregards Dharma and acts in an arbitrary and wanton manner is soon destroyed. The oath taken by king
Prithvi contains very explicit reference to the king's duty to observe law and administer justice. The entire process of the governance is seen as an activity to ensure the government of Law. The powers, privileges and prerogatives conferred on the king are meant to promote public good.

Prof. U.N. Ghoshal says that no aspect of the state administration in ancient India is so striking in its modernity as the policy for the promotion of public welfare. The following measures for ensuring public welfare are noteworthy:

1. Certain classes of persons i.e. students and teachers and scholars, women of all castes, people engaged in menial work, blind and other crippled people are declared to be altogether exempt from taxation.

2. Kautilya devises a comprehensive programme for relief of the public against human and providential calamities. These include public protection against anti-social elements, state control over marketing operations, state relief against fire, flood, famine, disease, pests and ferocious animals, inquest into causes of sudden death. etc.

3. The state is required to provide food, shelter, clothing, medicine for the needy.

4. The state is charged with the definite policy of promotion of public health. For the purpose state has to ban unwholesome food and medicine, state has
to have strict control over practicing physicians, state has to provide for medical treatment of the people.

Great emphasis has been laid on the intellectual and moral qualifies of the king. A wise and virtuous rule alone has the capacity to wills the rod of authority. Manu says that a king who does not uphold dharma and serve his people is bound to be destroyed. Thus Prof. Kewal Motwani says that in ancient Indian political thought, emphasis has been laid on the divinity of king and not on the divine rights of kings.

The second organ of state is the council of ministers. The vedic 'Samhitas' and 'Brahmans' acquaint us with the designations of civil and military officials as well as the officials of the central and local governments. For the members of the council of ministers, the terms 'Amatya' or 'Sachiva' has been used. Manu says that without the advice and assistance of able ministers it is well-nigh impossible for the king to govern. The strength of the council of ministers should be 7 or 8. The ministers must come from respectable families, they should be well-versed in shastras, and they should be fearless, impartial, patriotic, self-less and committed to the good of state and its people. Underlining the importance of competent ministers, Shukra says 'can these be prosperity of the kingdom if there be ministers whom the king does not fear? Such ministers are to be gratified with decoration, liveries of honour etc.' In the discharge of his duties, the king must be guided by
the advice of his ministers and wisemen. He must consult his ministers on matters relating to war and peace, sources of tax, general prosperity of the realm. In this connection, the significance of the office of 'Purohit' is noteworthy. 'Purohit' is the chief preceptor and guide of the king. Kautilya says that the king shall honour the advice of his 'Purohit' as a pupil honours the advice of his teacher, a son that of his father and a servant that of his master. Purohit credited with both temporal and spiritual functions was a great check on the arbitrariness great influence on the policies and decisions of chandragupta Maurya, and Samarth Ramdas, to a great extent, fulfilled the same role vis-a-vis shivaji.

The third organ of state is 'Rastra' which stands for the culturally homogenous people residing on a definite territory. The term occurs in vedas, and in 'Atharv Veda' many hymns to motherland are found in which Mother Earth has been requested to confer virtue and valour to the inhabitants. Kamandaka says that Rastra is the origin and source of all other organs of state and therefore the king should take every step to enrich the motherland and its inhabitants. Manu ponders over the geographical and physical requirements of a good state. The land should be fertile, climate should be favourable, the territory should not be prone to diseases and pestilence, famine and flood. The moral character of the inhabitants has also been emphasized. The atheists and heretics who pollute the ethical environment are to be excluded from the realm. The 'Dharma Sutras' and 'Artha
Shastra' against us with the divisions of the kingdom under two heads - rural and urban areas. Officers are placed in charge of each area. The rural officers are entrusted with the maintenance of law and order, with the preparation of census lists and administration of rural treasuries. Special officers are appointed for the administration of justice in rural areas. The urban officers are entrusted with the maintenance of law and order, the enforcement of building and sanitary regulations, and compilation of census lists of citizens. Separate officers are stationed in metropolitan and in other towns for the collection of the customs duties, for the management of the state treasuries, for the administration of justice and so forth.

Durg or Capital is the fourth organ of state. The capital which is the nerve-centre of state was very well-protected, and high, strong walls were constructed around it, giving the capital the look of a fort. Capital is the reflection of a nation's strength and prosperity. Utmost attention must be paid on the security of capital because if the enemy is able to take control of it or penetrate it, the very existence of state is jeopardized. Many types of Durg or forts have been spoken of in the political treatises of ancient India. Depending on location and architectural styles, they have been called by different names i.e. Dhanva Durg, Mahi Durg, Jal Durg, Nre Durg etc. We still find the remnants of many such forts in various parts of India, particularly in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharastra.
'Kosh' or Treasury is the fifth organ of state. Stressing the importance of treasury, Kautilya says. "All the activities of the state depend on treasury, therefore a king should accord priority to replenishing treasury. The Purans too regard treasury as the root of state. In order to replenish treasury, the king has to levy taxes, but taxation cannot be arbitrary and unprincipled. Therefore the Sages and seers have laid down the guiding principles of taxation and king should follow them while levying taxes. The following principles should be observed in respect of taxation:

1. Taxes should be so light that people are able to pay them effortlessly. Any increase in taxes should be gradual. Manu says. A king should receive taxes from his people gust as a lice, a calf and a bee receives blood, milk and honey for its sustenance. A king who heavily taxes his people weakens the foundations of state.

2. A king is entitled to tax people only when he fulfills his duty towards his people by protecting them. People our taxes to their king because he takes care of their welfare. Kalidas says in 'Raghuvansh' that the king is like sun who draws water from seas and oceans only to give it back in the form of rains. Taxation should not be a form of exploitation.
3. Taxes should be levied on traders and businessman only if they earn profit. In extraordinary circumstances, there should be provision for remission and concession.

As regards the sources of revenue, three major items of taxation are mentioned in ancient texts. Firstly, the land-revenue or 'Bhaga' was assessed directly on the holdings of individual cultivators. It was fixed at the rate ranging from 1/6th to 1/10th. Secondly, a tax on artisans was levied in the form of a fixed service or payment every month. Thirdly, custom Indies or 'Shulka' was levied on merchandise.

In the Arthashastra of Kautilya, the duties of two important revenue officers called 'Sannidhata' and 'Samaharta' have been described. 'Samaharta' was required to maintain exhaustive accounts of state income and expenditure under major and minor heads. Moreover the accountants were required to appear before the auditing officer at the end of financial year with their statements of accounts. Kautilya's Arthasastra, thus, brings us to an astonishingly modern aspect of state finance.

Bal or military organisation - the sixth organ of the state has also been dealt with in exhaustive manner in the ancient texts. The following points, in this regard, are worthy attention.

1. The army was recruited on the widest possible basis so as to include hereditary (Maul) as well as mercenary (Bhratya) troops, the states subjects
as well as aliens, disciplined troops as well as free-booters. Both officers and ordinary soldiers were paid salaries out of state treasury thus providing the oldest known example of Indian standing-army. The army was organised in four wings consisting of infantry, cavalry, and chariots.

2. As regards the organisation of army command, king was the head of military administration and these were three top-ranking military officers called senapati, prasasta and Nayaka who held overall charge of the army. The king and these officers were required to possess a broad knowledge of art of war in all branches, while trainers were provided for the management of elephants, horses and chariots.

3. Production and storage of armaments was also at high level. Kautilya speaks of a well-constructed state armoury with an officer-in-charge. The weapons were sufficiently varied to permit classification under four heads machines, weapons, mail-armour and accoutrements.

Kings of ancient India maintained strong and large armies in order to ensure the safety and security of the state. Magasthenese says that the army of chandra gupta Maurya had 4 lacs soldiers. There were 60,000 elephants and 1 lac soldiers in the army of Harshvardhana.

Mitra or friendly states is the seventh organ of state. Mitra stands for general structure of inter-state relations as well as for allies a state has in international
sphere. As far as foreign policy is concerned, the king should so devise and execute it that the number of allies is increased, threats from energies are contained or neutralized and if at all the war is unavoidable, the enemy-state is decisively defeated. In ancient Indian political thought, inter-state relations in all their aspects and dimensions have been explained through the theory of 'Mandal'. 'Mandal' consists of an aggregate of sovereign states which are bound by friendly, hostile as well as neutral relations with a control powerful state.

The ancient texts also contain the canons of foreign policy and principles of their application. The king, we are told, shall apply as is required by the time and circumstances the four bold policy of conciliation (Sam), dissension (Bheda), gift (Dan) and force of arms (Danda) towards his enemy, his ally and the neutral state. He shall apply as the time demands the six fold policy (Shadgunya) i.e. peace (Sandhi), war (Vigrdha), marching against the enemy (Yaan), neutrality (Aasan), seeking protection from a powerful king (Sam shraya) and dual policy (Dwaidhi dhav). In other words, expediency in the context of well known categories of diplomatic expedients as well as of the types of foreign policy should be key to the application of international relations.

Here, it is necessary to point out that ancient thinkers were of the firm view that war should be only last resort to settle inter-state disputes. And even when it becomes inevitable to uphold Dharma or righteousness, if should be fought on the
basis of a code of conduct. Manusmriti contains an elaborate description of the
laws of war so that mean and brutal tactics are eschewed during combat. In sum
one can say that war, if inevitable, should be fought for worthy ends and in an
honourable manner.

In the conduct of diplomatic relations among the states, the role of envoys
and ambassadors can not be overlooked. Various political treatises, particularly
kautilya's Arthashastra deal adequately with the institution of 'Duta' or messenger.
The 'dutas' are divided into three grades -

(i) One who is given full discretion about the message,

(ii) One who is entrusted with a definite message and

(iii) The who merely carries the royal mission.

These grades roughly correspond to the modern division between ambassadors,
envoys and charge's d' affairs. Besides normal diplomatic functions, the 'duta' is
required to organise and direct an extensive system of espionage and secret
propaganda in the enemy's kingdom.

Shukracharya, while elucidating, this theory of seven limbs or 'Saptang' says
that in the body politic, the king is head, the minister is the eye, the friend is ear,
the treasury is the month, the fort is the arms, the army is the mid region and
territory is the legs. The harmonious functioning of all the organs is key to a strong
and healthy state.
One is struck by existence of an elaborate body of laws and a well-developed system of judicial administration in ancient India. The Dharmasutras, the works of later vedic schools and Arthashastra of kautilya contain law-codes prevailing in those times. The fuller list of the sources of law is to be found in the ArthaShastra of Kautilya. According to it, there are four main sources of law (i) Vedas with their auxiliaries, (ii) the current law or Vyavhara (iii) usage or Sanstha and (iv) reasoning or Nyaya. Vedas or Shruti and their auxiliaries 'Smritis' lay down the principles of Dharma which are to observed and obeyed by the rulers, ministers and common people in their various activities and dealings under various circumstances. Customs or conventions are another source of law. The customs and practices are chiefly those of groups which formed the social life of the age. The groups are mainly of three types i.e. those belonging to distinct regious (Desas), to castes (Jatis) and families (Kula) and to functional groups (Sangas). We are thus told that the customs of Desa, Jatu and Kula along with the sacred scriptures are to be regarded as authoritative for kings administration of justice. Here it is important to point out that king is not the source of law as is held in modern positivist jurisprudence. The king is only required to dispense justice in accordance with above-mentioned laws; he has to carry the work of general administration keeping in view the injunctions and provisions of laws. Thus we can see that the powers of the kings are severely limited on this count.
The machinery for the administration of justice consists of court presided over by king and a number of subordinate courts. The king is assisted by a judge (Pradvivak) or a minister (Mantri) and assessors (Sabhyas) as well as an unofficial body of Brhaman advisers. As for the subordinate judiciary, there were rural and urban branches of judicial administration headed by 'Dharmastha' and Paur vyavaharika' respectively. These costs administered civil as well as criminal justice in accordance with prescribed judicial procedure.

As stated above, though monarchic types of polities were predominant political systems of ancient India, another type of polity republics was also prevalent in many parts of India. The most authentic account of the republican constitutions of the age are preserved in early Buddhist canonical literature. The following conclusions regarding the structure of republics can be drawn:-

1. They were ruled by clans claiming to belong to kshatriya caste, thus providing an example of aristocracies of birth. The sovereign authority belonged to the popular Assembly consisting of fully qualified members of this aristocracy. These members bore the title of 'Rajans', meaning the ruling authority. The Assembly had its regular meetings. The head of the state was 'Senapati' who was elected by the popular Assembly. The assembly enjoyed absolutely unfettered discretion in this matter.
2. The popular Assembly had complete freedom of debate and deliberation. The decrees of Republic were issued jointly in the names of 'Senapati' and Assembly.

3. The Assemblies in their best days were in the habit of strengthening themselves by admission of distinguished emigrants with full rights of citizenship.

4. In these republics the administrative officer bore the same title 'Mahamatta' as their counterparts in monarchies and were probably charged with the same functions.

5. The Republics usually consisted of a metropolitan city with dependent towns or settlements functioning under its authority.

The rise of unitary republics was accompanied by the formation of a few republican leagues. Among the examples of such leagues may be mentioned those of the Vajjis of Vaichali, the Andhaka-Vrishni and the Shudraka-Malva. The Vajjis are said to have consisted of eight component class. In these leagues, the heads of republics would meet together and deliberate mostly on the question of foreign policy and if need arose, on joint military action against a hostile state.

It is important to point out that new religious movements started by Mahavira and Gautam Buddha were led by the teachers springing from the republican soil. Nevertheless the long and well-established tradition of monarchic
states seems to have exercised a strong influence upon the republican administration.

The collapse of the republics and quasi republics of the Ganga basin took place within a generation after Buddha's death. The causes of this collapse were both internal and external. As regards the internal causes the public as well as private virtues of the republican people appear to have suffered a sad decay. In a well-known Jain canonical text 'Acharang sutra', the republican state is included in the list of regions which a Jain monk or nun should avoid. The external causes of the downfall of the republics may be traced to the aggressive designs of two neighbouring powerful monarchies of Magadh and Kosala.

The fore-going survey of ancient Indian political thought and institutions amply demonstrates that India had achieved great heights in the field of theoretical and practical politics. All the parts of political system were highly developed, properly co-ordinated and sufficiently controlled so as to ensure a stable and efficient conduct of human affairs. India could not have made marvelous progress in moral and material fields without a well-governed state. Political thought and institutions of ancient India bear the stamp of the ethos of its people. Political power, here, rests on spiritual-moral foundation and this fact is evident in all the institutions of state, whether central or local. Sri Aurobindo has summarized the essential character of Indian polity in the following words. "The Indian polity was
a system of very complex communal freedom and self-determination, each group unit of community having its own natural existence and administering its own proper life and business, setoff from the rest by a natural demarcation of its fields and limits but connected with the whole by well-understood relations, each a co-partner with the others in the powers and duties of the communal existence .... with a supreme co-ordination authority, a sovereign person and body armed with efficient powers and position but limited to its proper rights and functions, at once controlling and controlled by the rest."

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