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SOCIO POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Socio Political Structure in Ancient India

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Abstract – There are different, or we can say divergent views regarding the history of state and political ideas in ancient India. Different schools of thought have interpreted it differently. The first historians to write the political and social history of ancient India were imperialist administrators like James Mill and V.A. Smith. They wrote the history of India to serve the interest of British imperialism. James Mill divided Indian history into three periods— The Hindu Period, Muslim Period and British Period. Mill postulated that contemporary as well as ancient India was barbarous and anti-rational. Indian civilisation according to him showed no concern for political values and India had been ruled by a series of despots. Stagnant since its inception, Indian society was inimical to progress. Mill's History of India was one of the prescribed texts at the institutions like Haileybury College where English officers received their training before coming to India.

Keywords: Socio, Political, Structure, Ancient

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INTRODUCTION

Smith believed that India had a long tradition of oppressive despots— a tradition which ended only with the advent of the British. The clear implication of such a viewpoint was that Indians were not fit to rule themselves. The British wrote on early Indian history with a view to providing historical justification for the Raj and its exploitation of Indian resources. This quite often led to gross distortion of historical evidence.

Though India had no formal political philosophy, the science of statecraft was much cultivated and a number of important textbooks on this topic have survived. Dandanīti, the administration of force, or rājanīti, the conduct of kings, was a severely practical science, and the texts curiously dismiss the more philosophical aspect of politics, but give comparatively detailed advice on the organisation of the state and the conduct of governmental affairs.

The Arthashāstra gives very detailed instructions on various issues like the management of the state, the organisation of the national economy and the conduct of war and it is the most precious sourcebook for many aspects of ancient Indian life. The other important sources, in chronological order, are the great epics, the Mahābhārata, and the Rāmāyana. The great body of literature generally called smṛiti, giving instruction in the sacred law, is very important in this connection. From the Gupta period and the Middle Ages a number of political texts survive, the most important of which are the Nīṭisāra (Essence of Politics) of Kamandaka which was written during the Gupta period, the Nīṭivākyāmṛta (Nectar of Aphorisms of Politics) of Somadeva Suri, a Jaina writer of tenth century, and

the Nīṭisāra (Treatise on Politics) attributed to the ancient sage Shukra, but evidently of later medieval origin. Besides these sources, there is a tremendous amount of Brahmin, Jaina and Buddhist literature which deals on occasions with the politics of the time.

According to this theory the state is the result of evolutionary progress and it didn't originate at a fixed time. The tenth hymn of the eighth chapter of the Atharva Veda gives a picture of the evolutionary origin of the state.² On the basis of Atharva Veda several stages of the evolution of the state can be traced. The hymns of the Atharva Veda state that the earliest phase of human life was the stage of vairājya or stateless state. It was a state of complete anarchy. But subsequently, with the emergence of agriculture, stable life became possible. To fulfil the needs of agricultural society the family emerged and the head of the family became the first wielder of authority. Further, the need of co-operation in the different realms of society led to the emergence of sabhā and samiti. Sabhā was the organisation of elderly people and samiti was the general assembly of common people.³ With the emergence of sabhā and samiti organised political life began which finally culminated in the emergence of the state. A.S. Altekar, N.N. Law and H.C. Raychaudhuri somehow favour the theory of evolutionary origin. Altekar opines that as with other Indo-Aryan communities, the state also evolved in India in pre-historic times out of the institution of the joint family.⁴ R. Shamasastri also favours the evolutionary theory but in his opinion the earliest form of family in ancient India was matriarchal which after the invasion of Aryans became patriarchal.

SOCIO POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN ANCIENT INDIA

The basis of political obligation and the functions of state show the role of these institutions. What would happen if the state did not exist? The one recurrent theme in the Shānti Parva, the Ayodhyā Kānda and the Vishnu Dharmottara Purāna which contain the long description of arājaka (kingless) state is that family and property would not be safe in such a state.⁷ Bhandarkar has quoted five passages from Shānti Parva which suggest that the kingly office arose to protect the weak against the strong.⁸ Sharma opines that possibly it may not be correct to interpret the weak as poor and strong as rich but there are certain references which give the impression that the kingly office was meant to support the haves against the combined attacks of have-nots.⁹ The chief functions of the king also throw light on the purpose for which his office was created. One of the main duties of the king was the protection of private property by punishing the thief and that of the family by punishing the adulterers. So great was the responsibility for protecting property that it was incumbent on the king to restore to a subject the stolen wealth at any cost.¹⁰ Preservation of the varna (caste system) was another great responsibility of the king. Generally the maintenance of the caste system was considered an indispensable element of dharma, for according to Kamandaka if dharma is violated by the members of the state, there is bound to be pralaya or dissolution of the whole social order.

The dominant ideal that moved the king in ancient India was the attainment of dharma, artha and kāma. If the artha is taken in the sense of enjoyment of property, the kāma in the sense of enjoyment of family life and dharma in the sense of maintenance of the legal system, it would be clear that in the trivarga ideal also, principles of property, family and caste dominated.

Though ancient Indian political thinkers did not propound force theory in a systematic way, force was considered to be an important factor in the evolution of the state in India.¹² Earliest Aryan clans fought among themselves for pet animals (specially for the cow), pastureland, settlements and sources of drinking water. Only a strong and able warrior could lead the clan in such wars. So he was given special status and the members of clan started obeying him. This tendency continued in the days of peace also and subsequently the leader became king.¹³ Citing examples from the Vedas (Rig Veda and Sāma Veda) and the Brahmanas (Aitareya, Shatapatha) John Spellman also opines that the king in ancient India was primarily a military leader.¹⁴ But it should be clearly mentioned that none of the political commentators give a systematic and well knitted explanation of the role of force in the emergence of the state in ancient India.

Even before the days of Buddha, the king was exalted far above ordinary mortals, through the magical

powers of the great royal sacrifices. The royal consecration (Rājasūya) which in its full form comprised a series of sacrifices lasting for over a year imbued the king with divine power. In the course of the ceremonies he was identified with Indra "because he is a kshatriya and because he is a sacrificer" and even with the high God Prajāpati himself.¹⁶ He took three steps on a tiger skin and was thus magically identified with the God Vishnu whose three paces covered earth and heaven. The king was evidently the fellow of the God. The magical power which pervaded the king at his consecration was restored and strengthened in the course of his reign by further rites, such as the ceremonial rejuvenation of the Vājapeya and the horse-sacrifice (Asvamedha) which not only ministered to his ambition and arrogance but also ensured the prosperity and fertility of the kingdom.

The brahmanic rituals such as horsesacrifice fell into desuetude under the Mauryas, but was revived by the Sungas and was performed by many later kings both in North and South. After the period of the Guptas these sacrifices became rare, however, the last we have been able to trace took place in the Chola Empire in the eleventh century.¹⁷ But the tradition of royal divinity continued. Kings referred to their divine status in their titles and panegyrics, and they were regularly addressed by their courtiers as deva, or God. The Chola kings and some others were even worshipped as God in the temples. Regarding divine origin of kingship, a story repeatedly appears in the Mahābhārata and other texts. This is the very ancient story of the first man, Manu, who combined the characteristics of Adam and Noah in the Hebrew tradition.¹⁸ The story tells that at the beginning of this period of cosmic time, when greed and wrath had disturbed human relations, men inflicted untold misery upon one another.

Variants of this story occur in other parts of the Mahābhārata and elsewhere, some making the first king Virājas, the son of the God Vishnu. All adopt the earlier legends to stress the divine status of the king, and his divine appointment to the kingly office. With the exception of a few Rajput families who claimed descent from the fire-God Agni, nearly all medieval Indian kings traced their genealogies back to Manu, either through his son Ikṣvāku or his daughter Ilā.

DISCUSSION

Descendants of Ikṣvāku are referred to as of the solar and those of Ilā as of the lunar line.¹⁹ In thought, if not in practice, it was the mystical theory of kingship which carried most weight with succeeding generations. The author of the Arthashāstra had no illusions about the king's human nature, and seems to have had little time for mysticism, but he recognised that legends about the origin of kingship had propaganda value. In the Arthashāstra he states that the people should be told that, the king fulfils the functions of the God Indra (the king of Gods) and Yama (the God of death) upon earth, all who slight him will be punished not only by

the secular arm, but also by heaven.²⁰ Ashoka and other Mauryan kings took the title "Beloved of the Gods" (*devānāmpīya*), and, though they seem not to have claimed wholly divine status, they were no doubt looked upon as superior semi-divine beings. John Spellman also favours the view that the theory of divine origin was the dominant and popularly accepted theory regarding the origin of the state in ancient India. According to Spellman "The king was appointed by the God and ruled through divine grace."²¹ Spellman put forward two arguments²² in favour of his dictum. Firstly, in case of a Hindu ruler ruling arbitrarily and tyrannically there was no provision for secular punishment. The king would be punished only by divine powers. Secondly, the king was supposed to follow the divine laws and not man-made laws. So Spellman concludes that in ancient India, the basic notion of the origin of the state was based on divine creation.

We may summarise the main stages in this story, which is stated by the Buddha to refute the brahmins claim for precedence over members of all the other social classes. It is said that there was a time when people were perfect, and lived in a state of happiness and tranquility. This perfect state lasted for ages, but at last the pristine purity declined and there set in rottenness. Differences of sex manifested themselves, and there appeared distinctions of colour. In a word, heavenly life degenerated into earthly life. Now shelter, food and drink were required. People gradually entered into a series of agreements among themselves and set up the institutions of the family and private property. But this gave rise to a new set of problems, for there appeared theft and other forms of unsocial conduct. Therefore, people assembled and agreed to choose as chief a person who was the best favoured, the most attractive and the most capable. In return they agreed to contribute to him a portion of their paddy.

In contrast to the several obligations of the king, the people are assigned only one duty, namely, to pay a part of their paddy as contribution to the king. The rate of taxation is not prescribed but the contemporary law-book of Baudhayana lays down that the king should protect the people in return for one-sixth of the produce.²⁹ Originally the agreement takes place between a single kshatriya on the one hand and the people on the other, but at later stage it is extended to the kshatriya as a class. Towards the end of the story of creation in the *Dīgha Nikāya* it is stated that thus took place the origin of the social circles of the nobles, Khattiya Mandala. The earliest brahmanical exposition of the contract theory of the origin of the state in clear terms occurs in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. Just as in the *Dīgha Nikāya* this theory is propounded incidently in connection with the refutation of the brahmins claim of social supremacy, similarly in the *Arthashastra* it is expounded casually in the course of a talk amongst the spies about the nature of royal power. It cannot be regarded as a deliberate and thought out exposition,

as in the case with the theoretical discussion of the seven elements of the state. Nevertheless, into the terms of contract it introduces certain new elements which are absent in the *Dīgha Nikāya*.

The Kautilyan speculation is in keeping with an advanced economy, when different kinds of grain were produced so that the king laid claim not only to an unspecified part of paddy but also to a fixed part of all kinds of grain produce. Similarly, trade had been established as a regular source of income to the state, for both Megasthenes and Kautilya refer to officers regulating trade in this period. Besides, mining was a thriving industry in the Mauryan age. Probably on account of this, provision is made for payment of a part of *hiranya*, which covers not only gold but also includes similar other precious metals. Finally, the fact that even the inhabitants of the forest are not exempted from taxes is an indication of the comprehensive character of the Kautilyan state. Thus taken as a whole the first three taxes, namely, those in grain, commodities and metals, reflect the developed economy of the Mauryan period, and all the four taxes mentioned in the terms of contract made between the mythical Manu and the people betray to some extent the elaborate taxation system and the increasingly acquisitive character of the Mauryan state.

CONCLUSION

In Western political tradition three philosophers Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau who are jointly known as contractualists formulated the social contract theory regarding the origin of the state. All of them claimed that the state is not a natural institution but is created by a contract which suggests that the political authority is the result of mutual consent among individuals. But the three contractualist philosophers differ in their description of contract and various issues related to it. Contractualist philosophers start their description with the depiction of human nature. Based on this human nature they make a description of the state of nature which is a stage prior to the creation of the state.

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