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Indian Socio-Political Thought

Political Thoughts of Manu

Manu was one of the most original thinkers of Indian political thought. Most of the commentators on ancient Indian thought are of the view that Manu belongs to fourth century B.C. *Manusmriti* is a storehouse of information on the social, judicial and political life of that period. *Manusmriti* or *Manava dharmasastra* is the oldest and well-known *smriti*. The *Manusmriti* is the most authoritative work on Hindu Law and presents the normal form of Hindu society and civilisation. It contains social obligations and duties of various castes of individuals in different stages of life. *Manusmriti* referred to the sacred character of the laws in the four castes and four orders to the ancient customs and duties of the king. Manu made it clear that it was *trayi* (Three Vedas) that kept the mind steady and firm.

Manu on the origin of state

The theoretical concept of the state, as we now understand it, was non-existent in the past. According to many scholars, people initially lived in a state of nature prior to the origin of an organized state. The state of nature was like a state of war as there was no harmony, peace and goodwill. This period was called the darkest period of human history, a situation that is more or less equal to *Hobbesian Leviathan*. It is stated in *Manusmriti* in such a situation of utter lawlessness, people approached Lord Brahma, the creator, to relieve them from torturous life. Thus, the creator gave them the king to maintain law and order and punish the wicked. Thus, according to Manu, and state is not an institution that evolved gradually, but was a sudden creation. In modern times we find that state is sanctioned by the judgement of society, while in ancient times, it was permitted by the judgement of the ruler himself. In the times of Manu and *Kautilya* the theory of *Danda* really converted the state into crystallised force. They opined that if the *danda* was properly inflicted after consideration it made all people happy. Although; we find that the modern states like the ancient states also maintain huge army, have a large array of executive officials and exercise vast powers like ancient state.

Manu opined that apart from the divine origin of the state, the need for the state was not out of economic needs but out of evil intentions and uncontrollable habits of mankind.

Manu on Kingship

Manu believed that God created the king to save the people of a region. The King held a divine position and the people expressed their obedience to him because of his authority. Manu stated that the king appeared in human form and possessed the qualities of God.

Qualities of a King

According to Manu the king is the next best to God and he must have complete control over himself and his senses. He is a divine creation and his purpose is to promote social harmony, peace and welfare. King possesses certain qualities like Indra (God of War), Vaayu (God of Wind), Yama (God of Death), Ravi (God of Sun), Agni (God of Fire), Chandra or Moon, and Wealth. The king was described as an embodiment of eight guardians on earth. A king was expected to control his anger, satisfy the people and govern the state with their consent rather than the use of force. The king must exhibit those qualities that naturally make citizens obey him, and he must function through pleasing manners and intelligence. *Manusmriti* strongly advocated for a political authority. Manu suggested that though the king derived his authority from God, in practice he should be guided by the brahmanas. The rationale behind it was the assumption that brahmanas possess knowledge and knowledge should rule. Manu prescribed the structure of state in terms of villages, districts and provinces which resembles our present day structure of administration.

Council of Ministers

Manu viewed that the council of ministers were a very important part of a king. King without the council of ministers is like driving a chariot without wheels. The council of ministers were like the arms, eyes, ears of the king. The ideal number of council of ministers should be not more than seven to eight who collectively and individually assist and advise the king to discharge his daily duties. Manu opined that the council of ministers must possess certain essential qualities. They must possess high learning skills, must be men from high caste by birth, good warriors with a sharp understanding of various techniques of warfare and proper comprehension of state system and the like. A minister is said to be an honest mediator between the king and his subjects. The selection of ministers must be through hereditary principle, but the skills and qualities must be put in test before appointment. Manu opined that ministers were generally appointed by the king with advice from his friends and relatives. However, no *shudra* was allowed to become ministers.

Manu on Varna System

Manu viewed that caste system formed an essential part in ancient Hindu society. Varna system would preserve the social harmony of the society. He viewed that the king came into existence to protect the Varna system and any failure on the part of the ruler would make him unworthy ruler. Manu opined that there is a fourfold categorization of social organization derived from the Vedic

hymns. They are Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vyshyas and Shudras. It is widely viewed that these four Varnas represented four different parts of the body of the God. The Brahmanas rise from the head, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vyshyas from the thighs and the Shudras from the feet. The Brahmanas occupy the highest place and they are conceived as the incarnation of the law. The superior place given to the Brahman in the social hierarchy is due to the purity and knowledge. The Kshatriyas were expected to protect the state by their valour, offer sacrifices as well as gifts and protect the people. Manu viewed that a society would be more secure if there is a harmonious relation between the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. The Vyshyas were involved in trade and business whereas Shudras were only confined to serve the upper three castes. Manu said that the shudras must be barred from all social and sacred learning. The fourfold classification was called the *Chaturvarna* theory.

Socio-political thoughts of Valmiki and Vyasa

Valmiki was the famous *adikavi* (the original poet). He was not merely a writer, but a social reformer and philosopher who attempted to take a comprehensive view of the society and human life in his work. His famous work Ramayana was not only considered as a holy text but also was a documentary of the then social and political life. Ramayana was among the very few literary works that enjoyed universal and eternal relevance. The two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have a close relationship with the Kaushal republic. Valmiki lived by the banks of the Tamasa River. The basis of Kaushal's foundation makes it easy to study the poetic philosophy and values of Vedvyas and Valmiki. Valmiki in his socio-political thoughts laid the foundation of a deeply humanistic philosophy. His epic Ramayana does not begin with invocation of any God. He laid the foundation of a poetic tradition that was not about worshipping any God, but deeply human. Valmiki viewed that his epic Ramayana is not merely for the twice-born but also for the Shudras (untouchables). His protagonist, Rama declares himself to be human. Some scholars say that Valmiki's ideology is a mixed ideology. It does not contravene the Vedic traditions while also making non-Vedic materialist ideology a part of its humanism.

Valmiki's Humanism

Valmiki portrayed the ugly politics of his times. He viewed that on the one hand there were rulers steeped in spirituality, neglecting material development of the State and on the other, there were hedonists who were destroying spiritual realization. Valmiki expounded that religion should not only lie in rituals. According to Valmiki wasting wealth on meaningless rituals is itself against public welfare and humanity at large. It did not also lie in renouncing

the world and singing hymns. Those people who gave up material comfort and seek religion annoyed Valmiki. According to Valmiki, Religion (dharma); material wealth and physical desire are life's most cherished goals. Religion resulted in wealth and wealth gave rise to desire. Moreover, desire is a physical demand which cannot be ignored. However, immoral physical lust is degenerate and is an impure facet of desire. According to Valmiki, a man full of lust forgets his religion, loses his wealth and ruins himself completely. Valmiki followed that middle path. He viewed that Salvation (moksha) lied in advancing on the road of religion, wealth and desire. The positive aspect of Valmiki's humanism lies in the fact that it sought the welfare of the society along with individual welfare. Moreover; a person who is harmful to the society should be thrown away and punished immediately. Valmiki is not of the view that one must only hate the sin, not the sinner. According to him, a sinner not only destroys himself but drags others onto the path of destruction. Just as the fish living in a pond inhabited by snakes is killed along with the snakes, an innocent person too is destroyed when he is in the company of sinners. It is difficult to find such a strong argument in favour of public welfare. However; we could find that in Valmiki's epic, humanism wins in the clash with feudal values-not partially but completely. Rama is not portrayed as an incarnation of Visnu, but as a heroic person embellished with superb human qualities and extra-ordinary capabilities. In Ramayana we find that when Ram proceeds to the *Shradh* ceremony of his father, Jabala calls it sham. But the societal order is strong and Ram does not have the courage to negate it. Rama's idea was to strictly follow the codes of honour and the honoured arrangements. Similarly, when Rama kills the demon, Sita says it is not good to kill an innocent being. But, Rama claims he was ready to give up everything but not the prescribed order. Valmiki also depicted the role of different kinds of human relationship in society. According to Valmiki, there are two kinds of friends: One, who is always, has an eye on his friend's wealth and the other, who is solely dependent on truth and duty. There can be no better definition of friendship. Money has plenty of friends. But it is an enemy of those who stand for Truth and Duty. In this, Valmiki accurately establishes a norm for societal progress.

State

Valmiki's creation is a portrayal of the ugly politics of his times. The society was in anarchy despite of having a king. Moreover, Valmiki viewed that there were weaknesses in the espionage system that was set up in the kingdoms. We could find that both Rama and Ravana were able to learn of each other's action plans. Furthermore, Valmiki imagines an ideal State where people are safe and happy and there is material and spiritual prosperity. A king who

goes against his subjects cannot protect his kingdom. Such a State is destroyed by its own ruler. People's welfare is of utmost importance, no matter what the political system is. Disregard of the people will result in disregard of the system itself. In politics, deeds of one person can affect the entire State. Therefore, only he who sleeps with his eyes closed but keeps his justice eyes open at all times, can be a popular ruler. Valmiki, the sagacious poet also throws light on other aspects of statecraft, which may be explained as the principles of good governance. The multifarious functions of a state include appointment of capable ministers and other officials, establishment of fortified cities, making provisions for a well-managed treasury, collection of taxes, initiating welfare measures for the benefit of the people, appointment of secret agents with a view to collecting information regarding the internal affairs of the state as well as the intentions and movements of the allies and enemies and other related activities.

Women

Valmiki like Manu also put women on a lower social pedestal than men. They both viewed that Truth and Duty was for men alone; for the duty of a woman was to idolize her husband. The then society had not recognized the qualities and strength of a woman. And Valmiki too seems to speak like Manu when one of his characters in the epic, Kaushalya, declares that husband, son and father were the three sanctuaries of a woman. There is no fourth refuge for her. However, Valmiki's poetic narration was equally sensitive to Sita's anguish and has therefore shown progress even while he speaks of codes of honour.

Moral Views

Valmiki's moral values, too, are remarkable. All preach about duty towards one's mother, father and teacher. A son must obey his parents. However, significantly when one's visible Gods – Mother, Father and Guru are present – how does one worship invisible Gods. Thus, there is no god as holy as these visible gods on Earth. But, Valmiki warns that a teacher, who in his arrogance forgets his duty and takes the wrong path, is a candidate for punishment, not service. Action without self-regard may have a place of its own. But, in Valmiki's opinion, only a fool will work without thinking of the consequences and reward. There are only two kinds of action: good and bad. Man experiences happiness or suffering as a consequence of an action.

Socio-political thoughts of Vyasa

Mahabharata authored by Krsna Dvaipayana Vyasa can be described as a storehouse of socio-political contents of those times. The life history of Vyasa is shrouded in darkness. His mother was Satyawati- the step-mother of Bhisma and wife of Santanu. The name of his father was Parasara. Krishna Chaitanya writes about the meaning of the name Vyasa, that Krishna seems to have been his given name unless as some believe, he was known thus because he was dark in complexion. He was called Dwaipayana because he was born in a river is-let (dwlp means island). He came to be known as Vyasa because- according to tradition- he was the man who first separated, arranged, edited (the word implies all these) the vast corpus of orally transmitted Vedic material into four great compilations which are the form in which they have come down to us. Vyasa-s other name is said to be Badarayana due to his having resided at Badarikasrama which was situated in the land of Utrkhand. A set of scholars regard Vyasa not the author but the arranger of the Mahabharata, The gigantic poem Mahabharata is not only a narrative of the Bharatas but also a great epic in which spiritual, religious and ethical ideas, social and political ideals and culture of India have been knit together with an artisan's skill.

Social Structure

Mahabharata gives a clear picture of the social structure of that period. The epic gives accounts of the education of the princes or the Ksatriya children whose future career was either military service or politics. There are descriptions of *Dhrtarastra*, *Pandu* and *Vidura* who had studied all the four Vedas and different *astras*. They were very much adept in *Nttisastra* (Polity), *Itihasa*, *Dhanurveda* and other subjects, club-fights, in the use of swords etc. Drona, who was a specialist in the science of Arms, was appointed as the teacher Pandav and Kaurav princes. There were several evidences to prove the fact that these princes acquired different specializations under the noble guidance of Drona. Arjuna became specialist in archery. Nakula and Sahadeva in wielding swords. These system of education and training was also imparted to the next generations of Pandavas. Abhimanyu was made expert in the science of arms by Arjun, the father himself. Moreover, elephant –riding and horsemanship, chariot driving, music etc were the integral part of the princely education. The

entire military science called Dhanurveda was studied in isolation and by practice. There were many glaring examples about the education which was imparted to the Brahmin and there were also descriptions of their centres of learning. Moreover many glaring examples like the depiction of the Shudra lad Ekalavya who acquired the skills by making an earthen idol of his ideal teacher Drona and worshipping it by way of continuous practise but sadly had to end up his archery because of some evil plans proved the fact that some education were strictly restricted to the upper castes. Furthermore, the education of the Vaisya and the Sudra was such that they could be prepared to perform their duties well. Besides, we could find that the military interest of the epics predominates over the intellectual. The predominant part of their history was also taken by the military and ruling caste. The bulk of the intellectual life of the country centred in the hermitages and homes of Rishis and Brahmins, which did not receive notice in the Epics except when they are connected in the course of their story.

Dandaniti-Science of Government

The Mahabharata is not devoid of the knowledge pertaining to Dandaniti (Science of Government) for which different terms have been used in it. These are *Rajadharma*, *Rajasastra*, *Dandaniti*, *Arthasastra*, *Arthavidya*, and *Rajanitisastra*. Dandaniti acts as a saviour of Dharma and it is of great for the King in bringing the people back to the right path. The Santi Parva throws light on the scope and subject matter of Dandaniti. Although it is primarily concerned with the state-craft, yet the fourfold objectives of human life are dealt with in it.

Dandaniti is linked with all kinds of limitations of conduct and knowledge. It has widened its scope due to the beyond the boundaries of measurement. Moreover, we get to know about Varta. Military science, medical science, veterinary science etc. are included in Varta. The king is instructed in the Mahabharata to promote the Varta-agriculture, veterinary science, trade and commerce which is very much essential for the existence of the human society. Furthermore, we could find that the Military Science was at its peak during the Mahabharata times. The other name given to the Military Science was Dhanurveda. To acquire knowledge of Military Science one had to seek the blessings of the learned Guru. There are descriptions in the Mahabharata of Drona and Parasurama as renowned and outstanding teachers of Military Science, Drona made Kauravas and Pandavas perfect in this science. The account of varied weapons is found in this great epic which is in no way less destructive than the

weapons of modern age. Arjuna and Pandu excelled in archery and Nakula and Sahadeva in the wielding of swords. Ayurveda (Medical Science) finds a prominent place in the great epic Mahabharata. There is a description in the epic that the physicians were given due regard. Essential medical facilities were provided for maintaining a high standard of the health of the people during the age of the Mahabharata.