# Contribution of Romans to Political Thought

We are well-acquainted with the imperialist designs of Rome. Roman emperors were mainly preoccupied with the expansion of empire through their aggressive activities. Hence Roman civilization had hardly anything to do with political thought or political philosophy.

It is practically impossible to discover an academic of the stature of Plato and Aristotle. In spite of these minus points we very often use the term ‘Roman political thought’ and the use of the term is the source of a lot of confusion.

The reason of confusion is if a civilisation fails to produce a coherent and glorious thought on political science how can we call Roman political thought? Even if we call so, is it justified?

All these questions are pertinent. But in order to understand the nature of Roman political thought we shall have to throw light on Roman concept of law and related subjects.

Maxey has rightly observed—”What Rome gave the world was not political theory, but the materials for political theory. In the secularisation of law she laid foundations on which many of the salient doctrines of European and American political thought have been built” Romans did not directly contribute anything to the domain of political thought.

Their main preoc­cupation was with law and jurisprudence. In fact, their contribution to these fields was original. The Romans evolved the most complete and minutely perfected system of law known to the ancient world.

Even the legal system of the subsequent periods almost of all the countries of the world was based on the Roman legal system built up by the renowned lawyers of Rome.

The Romans secularized the legal system and Machiavelli (1469-1527) secularised politics. The Greeks viewed law in term of religion and ethics. This tendency very often clouded the real aspect of law and affected its functioning. The Romans secularized law.

They viewed law in a positive and realistic way. They emancipated law from the shackles of religion and ethics. In doing this they considerably enhanced the practical importance of law. Romans did this to establish a well- ordered empire. This attempt and attitude of Romans laid the foundation of a number of political ideas of Western Europe and America.

The concept of sovereignty emerged out of the Roman concept of law. People obeyed law not because it is ethical or religious, but because it is the command of the supreme political authority and it is the manifestation of the will of body-politic.

Only the sovereign authority can sanction such a law and to disobey such a law implies to disobey the sovereign authority which is bound to be followed by punishment.

The theory of political obligation is another offshoot of Roman theory of law. People learnt to show obligation to law duly sanctioned by the highest authority of political organisation. The subsequent thinkers drew their inspiration for building up a coherent theory of political obligation.

The idea of legal rights was also derived from the Roman theory of law and jurisprudence. Religious and ethical view of law cannot be the real source of legal rights. By freeing law from the clutches of religion and ethics the Romans built up a concrete theory of legal rights. Subsequently this view founded a strong basis of an elaborate system of various rights.

Another aspect of Roman contribution to political thought is the separation between state and individual. Gettell writes “The Romans separated state and individual each having definite rights and duties. The state was a necessary and natural framework for social existence; but the individuals rather than the state, was made the centre of legal thought, and protection of rights of the individual was the main purpose for which the state existed. The state was thus viewed as a legal person, exercising its authority within definite limits, but the citizen was viewed as a legal person having rights which were to be safeguarded against other persons and against illegal encroachment by the government itself.”

The Roman political thought made this important distinction between the individual and the state as well as the relationship between them. It is no doubt a very important contribution. Maxey says that this contention of Roman political thought created a positive impact upon the later day political thought of Western Europe and America. The individu­als came to know that they had certain rights and the state authority was legally bound to protect them.

The Romans had developed a legal system applicable for several nations. This is called law of nations or international law. The jus gentium of Romans constitutes the basis of modern day’s international law.

The Romans developed certain basic principles of jus gentium in order to establish legal authority upon the foreigners. The Romans also gave special importance to the natural law because of its reasonableness. Even today we hold the view that we obey law because it is reasonable.