

UPT
UNIT 5

The Idea of Political Community: Political Obligation



Introduction

- The idea of political community is foundational to the study of political theory. It signifies the collective life of individuals under a common legal and institutional framework, bound together by shared rules, a governing structure, and mutual recognition of authority.
- Alongside this, the concept of political obligation deals with a central question of political philosophy: why should individuals obey the laws of the political authority under which they live?
- Together, political community and political obligation form the basis of all legitimate governance, from the city-states of antiquity to modern liberal democracies.

Meaning of Political Community

- A political community refers to all individuals living within a defined geographical area, organized under a common political system and governed by a shared body of laws.
- Unlike cultural, religious, or professional communities, which are organized around identity or function, a political community is specifically organized for the exercise of power toward political ends, including law, order, defense, and the public good.

Historically, the political community has been central to major political philosophies:

- In Plato's Republic, the ideal state is conceptualized as a highly rational, hierarchical political community where justice emerges when each class performs its designated role.
- Aristotle conceived of the polis not just as a mechanism for survival but for achieving the good life (eudaimonia). He viewed political community as the most natural form of human association, grounded in speech and reason, and oriented toward justice and virtue.
- In the Social Contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, political community is seen as the product of a rational agreement among individuals to create a collective authority for mutual protection and cooperation.

In this sense, the political community serves a functional role: it is the organization of power for political purposes, derived from the collective will of its members.

Nation, State and Political Community vs Nation

It is crucial to distinguish political community from similar but distinct concepts like nation and state:

- A nation is an imagined cultural community, as defined by Benedict Anderson. It is bound by shared traditions, language, ethnicity, and collective memory. Nations may exist without sovereignty or statehood , as was the case with Jews for centuries before the formation of Israel. Thus, while a nation is a cultural construct, a political community is a legal and territorial construct.
- A state, by contrast, is a legal-political instrument created and maintained by a political community. It includes institutions such as bureaucracy, law enforcement, military, and judiciary , the apparatus through which power is exercised.
- However, a political community can exist without a functioning state , as seen in failed or collapsed states where communal identity persists despite state breakdown (e.g., Somalia or Libya).

Hence, the political community is broader and more enduring than the state. It encompasses the people, the shared recognition of belonging, and the expectation of mutual obligation, beyond merely the administrative machinery of the state.

Why Obligate?

- The concept of political obligation addresses the normative question: Why should individuals obey the laws and commands of their government? What gives the state moral authority over individuals? Various theories provide answers, often overlapping in justification:
- **1. Consent Theory**
 - Rooted in social contract thought, consent theory holds that individuals are bound by laws because they have either explicitly or implicitly agreed to them.
 - According to Hobbes, people surrender all rights to an absolute sovereign for the sake of security. Locke, more moderately, views the contract as a mutual agreement where individuals consent to abide by majority rule in return for protection of life, liberty, and property. Rousseau takes it further by arguing that political obligation arises from the general will, a collective moral force each individual has participated in shaping.
 - Even in modern democracies, voting, citizenship, and civic participation are often taken as forms of implicit consent.

- **2. Moral Duty Theory**



- This theory emphasizes moral responsibility as the basis of obedience. If one is a member of a political community, one has a duty to contribute to its stability and function , much like one has duties toward family or society. Disobedience, then, is not just illegal but morally wrong as it threatens communal harmony and shared life.

- **3. Fairness Theory / Duty of Fair Play**



- Advanced by thinkers like H.L.A. Hart and John Rawls, this theory posits that when individuals benefit from the social order, public goods, roads, education, healthcare, defense , they incur a reciprocal duty to obey the laws that make those benefits possible. Fairness demands that individuals do their part in sustaining a cooperative scheme, lest free-riding render it unsustainable.

• 4. Prudential or Pragmatic Justifications



- Under utilitarianism, obedience to the law is justified if it promotes the greatest good for the greatest number. Laws are tools of utility, and as long as they provide net benefit (peace, security, predictability), individuals should obey them. This is echoed in J.S. Mill's pragmatic liberalism.
- There is also a self-interested basis: to avoid punishment, penalties, or loss of social standing, it is reasonable to obey authority, especially in systems where the cost of defiance is high.

Limits and Challenges

Political obligation is not unlimited or unconditional. Classical liberal theory, anarchism, and civil disobedience traditions have questioned blind obedience.

- Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized conscience and justice over legality. According to them, laws that perpetuate injustice (e.g., slavery, segregation) have no moral force, and disobedience becomes a moral duty.
- Anarchists like Bakunin and Goldman argue that political obligation cannot be grounded because all political authority is coercive and illegitimate by nature.

In modern political theory, the tension between order and autonomy, obedience and conscience, continues to shape debates around state legitimacy, especially in authoritarian contexts.

The Right to Dissent

- The right to dissent signifies an individual's moral or political justification to withhold obedience when the state acts unjustly or unlawfully.
- While Hobbes rejects dissent, arguing in Leviathan that subjects must obey the sovereign unconditionally to avoid the chaos of the state of nature, later thinkers challenge this absolutism.
- Kautilya, in contrast, while advocating a strong and centralized ruler in the Arthashastra, also emphasizes Rajadharma, the duty of the king to uphold justice, prosperity, and dharma. If the king fails, he risks revolt or divine retribution, implying a limit to political obligation.
- Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. advocate civil disobedience when laws are unjust, prioritizing conscience and morality.
- John Rawls supports justified civil disobedience in unjust societies, and Hannah Arendt highlights the moral responsibility to resist tyrannical regimes.

Political Community in the 21st Century

- The nature of political community is evolving under globalization, migration, and digital governance.
- Questions arise: Can there be political communities across borders (e.g., EU)? Do online identities form new political communities? Does multiculturalism threaten or enrich political community?
- Global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and international terrorism call for cosmopolitan political communities that extend beyond nation-states.
- Yet, nationalism and identity politics assert the need for localized, culturally embedded political communities. This tension reflects the complexity of forming political obligation in plural, diverse societies.

Conclusion

- The idea of political community offers a powerful framework for understanding how individuals relate to one another through a common political structure.
- It is the backdrop against which the concept of political obligation emerges , the sense that citizens are morally, legally, or pragmatically bound to obey laws and support the governing system.
- While various theories offer differing justifications , consent, duty, fairness, or utility, all grapple with the same core question: What binds individuals to a collective, and what legitimizes authority over them?
- In modern liberal democracies, where legitimacy rests on participation, inclusion, and accountability, understanding the idea of political community and political obligation remains more relevant than ever.

UNIT 5

Previous Year Questions

(a) Political community

राजनीतिक समुदाय

9. Write an essay on idea of political obligation to state.

राज्य के प्रति राजनीति बाध्यता के विचार पर निबंध लिखिए।

7. Discuss the significance of political obligation in the context of democratic governance.

लोकतांत्रिक अभिशासन के संदर्भ में राजनीतिक बाध्यता के महत्व पर चर्चा कीजिए।

9. What are the main arguments in favour of Political Obligation.

Shukriya

