Indian Traditions, Culture & Society

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INDIA

State In Ancient India

When a large number of human beings live together, there is need for some rules and regulations. So since early days, there is a realization in India that there has to be a 'Society' governed by some commonly agreed rules and regulations. However, such a 'society' is only loosely regulated - it is governed by customs and practices, not by laws. Therefore, some more rigorous organization is needed, a system called 'State' in political thought, a political system with a legal sanction and foundation, a system ruled by law.

A 'State' or *Rājya*, has several dimensions - the duties/ rights of the ruled and the rulers. 'Society' or Samāja, has its own components, the different communities, and functional units called varnas or castes. In ancient India, a society has its structural units such as family, marriage, customs and practices such as inheritance, rituals of marriage and mourning, and finally a framework of individual and social life for example the *āśrama vyavasthā* laid down in the Hindu society as an ideal organization of an individual's life.

State has been the key concept in political science since the period of grand thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. One of the most important topics in political science has been the origin and evolution of the state. In ancient India also thinkers like Bhisma, Narada, Brihaspati, Kautilya, Kamandaka have looked at the problem. On the basis of the writings of these thinkers we can detect four important theories regarding the origin of the state in ancient India, namely -

a) Evolutionary Theory

b) Force Theory

c) Mystical Theory

d) Contract Theory

Theory of Evolutionary Origin

Evolutionary Theory - This is the oldest theory of the origin of the state in India and has been mentioned in the *Atharva Veda*.. The tenth hymn of the eighth chapter of the *Atharva Veda* gives a picture of the evolutionary origin of the state. According to this theory the state is the result of evolutionary progress and it didn't originate at a fixed time. Based on *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 with the emergence of agriculture, stable life became possible. To fulfil the needs of agriculture, 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 organization of elderly people and *samiti* was the general assembly of common people. With the emergence of *sabhā* and *samiti* organized political life began which finally culminated in the emergence of the state.

Force Theory

Force Theory - 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. 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. 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. 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.

Theory of Mystical Origin

Mystical Theory - This was the most popular theory of origin of the state in ancient India. Kingship was given divine sanction and the king was considered not to be the representative of God but himself a God who contained the powers of important Gods like Indra, Varuna and Agni.

It appears first in the epics and the law books of Manu. The king was exalted far above ordinary mortals, through the magical powers of the great royal sacrifices. The magical power which pervaded the king at his consecration (Rājasūya) 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.

Contract Theory

Contract theory is the most extensively discussed theory of the origin of the state in ancient India. The reference to contract theory can be seen in the Buddhist texts like Dīgha Nikāya and Mahāvastu and brahmanical texts like Shānti Parva and Arthashāstra of Kautilya.

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. Many differences have appeared like 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 like 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. The individual, who was thus elected, came to hold in serial order three titles: a) Mahāsammata b) Khattiya and c) Rājā

According to the text the first title means one chosen by the whole people, the second title means the lord of the fields, the third title means one who charms the people by means of dharma.

Stages of State Formation in Ancient India

Six main stages in the history of ancient Indian polity can be identified.

1. The earliest stage was that of tribal military democracy in which tribal assemblies, which had some place for women were mainly pre-occupied with war. The age of Rig Veda was primarily a period of assemblies.

2. The second stage saw the break-up of the tribal polity under the stress of constant conflicts between the rājanyakshatriya and the ordinary businessman called the vis. The chiefs were helped by the priesthood called the brahmins. This stage saw the beginning of taxes and classes or varnas which came to be firmly established in the third stage.

3. The third stage was marked by the formation of the full-fledged state. There arose large territorial monarchies of Kosala and Magadha and tribal oligarchies in North-Western India and at the foot of the Himalayas. For the first time we hear of large standing armies and organized machinery for the collection of land revenue.

4. The fourth or the Maurya phase saw bureaucratic centralization based on the expanding economic activities of the state. The state with the help of its bureaucracy controlled various aspects of the life of its subjects.

5. The fifth stage was marked by the process of decentralized administration in which towns, feudatories and military elements came to the forefront in both the Deccan and North India. This was partly neutralized by the emphasis on the divinity of the king.

6. The last stage, identical with the Gupta period, may be called the period of proto-feudal polity. Land grants now played an important part in the formation of the political structure and those made by the Gupta feudatories conferred fiscal and administrative privileges on priestly beneficiaries.

THANK YOU...