
UNIT-1 PRE-MODERN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS POLITICAL THOUGHT IN INDIA: THE DIVERSE STRANDS

Structure

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 State and Sovereignty in Ancient India
- 1.3 State and Sovereignty in Medieval India
- 1.4 Religion and Polity
- 1.5 Summary
- 1.6 Exercises

1.1 INTRODUCTION

To understand modern Indian political thought, it is essential to have a broad view of the historical processes through which the modern polity has emerged. We have civilisation which is comparable with the Greek civilisation and as Plato and Aristotle are considered as the pioneers of western political tradition, so are our ancient and medieval texts on statecraft. Whether it is the concept of monarchy, republicanism, council of ministers, welfare state, diplomacy, espionage system or any other political concept/institution which is known in modern political parlance, all these have references in our early political traditions. State, society and governance are interlinked to each other. If we look at our past we will find that there was a time when people used to live in small groups based on kinship ties and there was no need felt for an authority to control people's life. But with the growth of population and clashes between groups of people, the need was felt for an authority who would provide the required protection to his people and whose order would be obeyed by all. With the coming of groups of people together, society came into existence which was followed by the emergence of state and the art of governance. So in a way we can say that individual needs led to the emergence of society and it is the collective need of the society which in turn led to the formulation of various structures and theories related to state and governance. Thus, the social-historical context becomes a determinant factor in the evolution of state as well as the ideas related to statecraft. Keeping this in mind when we look at our past we find that starting from the Vedic society till the establishment of the British rule India passed through various phases and also had undergone various political experiments. All these traditions and experiences in one way or other have contributed in making what we call modern Indian political thought. It is not possible to deal in detail all these developments in one Unit. Therefore, our focus in this Unit will be to familiarise you with the major trends in pre-modern Indian political thought. With the help of historical texts like Manusmriti, Arthashastra, Fatwa-i-Jahandari, Ain-i-Akbari which are considered as important treatises on statecraft, we will try to explain the evolution of the Indian political thought. In the first section, we will introduce you to the tradition based on Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain literature, then the Islamic political tradition and finally, the relationship between religion and state in India.

1.2 STATE AND SOVEREIGNTY IN ANCIENT INDIA

In her seminal work on social formations in the mid-first millennium B.C. Romila Thapar has explained transition from lineage society to state (R. Thapar, *History* and *Beyond*, collection of essays). In lineage society the basic unit was the extended family under control of the eldest male member. The size of the family was dependent on economy and environment and it was the genealogical relationships which tied the families together. It was through kinship and rituals, that the chief exercised his authority over the clans. Differentiation came in within society between the ruler and the ruled because of kin connections and wealth. However, shift from pastoral to peasant economy, population growth, social and cultural heterogeneity along with other factors led to the emergence of state systems. In the opinion of Romila Thapar conquest, extensive trade, the decline of political elite and democratic processes led to the change towards state system. The Vedic period represented the lineage system but later on growing stratification in society indicated the tendency towards state formation. With the formation of state the issue of governance of the state became a major concern of the society. In the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata we find the reference to *Matsyanyaya*, a condition in which small fishes become prey to big fishes. This analogy was given to explain the anarchic condition in a society where no authority exists. To avoid this type of crisis, people collectively agreed to have a set of laws and to appeal to the god for a king who will maintain law and order in society. It is also argued that without appealing to any divine agency people on their own selected a person on whom the authority was vested to protect human society. We find references to both Divine Origin of Kingship as well as Social Contract Theory of Kingship. Though theological and metaphysical environment had a strong influence in shaping the ancient Indian thinking, various studies on ancient Indian polity suggest the emergence of polity as an independent domain. Whether it was a Divine Origin of Kingship or Social Contract, we find monarchy as the dominant form of government in the early Indian polity. The seven constituents of the state as prescribed in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata are as follows:

Swamin or the sovereign,

Amatya or the officials,

Janapada or the territory,

Durga or the fort,

Kosa or the treasury,

Danda or the Army,

Mitra or the Allies.

All these are considered as the natural constituents of a state. State is visualised as an organic body having seven organs. Swamin or the king is considered as the head of this structure. Next to him is the Amatya or the council of ministers through which the king governs the state. Janapada means territory having agricultural land, mines, forests, etc. Durga or fort suggests the fortification of the capital. Kosa or treasury, the place where collected revenues are kept. Danda refers to the power of law and of authority. Mitra is the friendly state. Looking at this structure of state one finds lot of resemblance with the

attributes of the modern state. *Manusmriti* strongly advocated for a political authority. **Manu** was of the opinion that in the absence of a political authority, there would be disorder in society. It is the duty of the king to ensure justice in the society and protect the weak. 'By taking his due, by preventing the confusion of the castes (varna), and by protecting the weak, the power of the king grows, and he prospers in this (world) and after death'. (from *Manusmriti* cited in A. Appadorai, *Indian Political Thinking*). **Manu** was in favour of social hierarchy and caste system and his notion of justice was based on diverse customs and practices of different castes. He 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. If one looks at the rationale behind this organisational structure, one may easily find that the principle of decentralisation of authority was the guiding principle behind this organisation. He also advocated an assembly of the learned as well as the officers of the state to advise the king and this shows his concern for the public opinion. Members were expected to be objective and fearless in taking decisions on the basis of dharma. Village and district authorities were suggested to function independently and only when there was any need, the king was expected to help. Welfare of the general people was one of the major concerns of the king. 'If the inhabitants of the cities and the provinces be poor, the king should, whether they depend upon him immediately or mediately, show them compassion to the best of his power.... Wiping the tears of the distressed, the helpless and the old, and inspiring them with joy, constitute the duty of the king'. (*Mahabharata-Shanti Parva*, cited in A. Appadorai, *Indian Political Thinking*). Commenting on the political ideas explained in the *Manusmriti*, V.R. Mehta in his *Indian Political Thought*, has remarked that 'It is indeed astounding to know that very early in the development of Indian political thought, the ideas of decentralisation, welfare state and public opinion are so clearly spelled out'.

In terms of early Indian political thought, *Arthashastra* by Kautilya gives a more detailed picture of statecraft. Scholars are of the opinion that *Arthashastra* is not the work of one Kautilya and the date of Kautilya is also a matter of debate among historians. It is also argued that there are interpolations in the *Arthashastra*. Whatever be the truth the fact remains that *Arthashastra*, as a text, deals with various functions as well as the methods of running the state. Moving ahead of **Manu**, Kautilya advocated a strong monarchy but he was not favourable to the idea of absolute monarchy. While in the earlier tradition, the king was guided by brahmanical authority, in *Arthashastra* the king is considered to have the last word in all matters. On the chapters dealing with the king and his family, *Arthashastra* tells us as to how a king should control his senses and discharge his duties, how a king should protect himself from any threat on his life and the importance of selection of right counsellors and priests. There is an elaborate discussion on the civil law explaining various measures required for an effective administration and on criminal law to take care of those people who are considered as a threat to the country. Kautilya cautioned the king to be vigilant about the motives and integrity of his ministers and also talked about general selfish nature of people, bribery and corruption inherent in administration. He suggested that through reward and punishment, the king should set a standard for others to follow. In his opinion, the king is above others but not above 'dharma'. Here dharma means obeying customary and sacred law and protection of his subjects' life and property. This was considered as the basic duty of a king. Suggestions have also been given to deal with friendly and hostile neighbours,

organisation of armies, for spies to keep a watch on internal and external developments. We are told that army should be placed under a divided command since this is a sure guarantee against treachery. The notion of welfare state is further strengthened in Arthashastra. The king is expected to protect agriculturists from oppression and to take care of the orphans, the aged and the helpless. Happiness of his people should always be the concern of a wise king, otherwise he may lose people's support; a good king should take up welfare activities in the interest of all. According to Kautilya 'in the happiness of his subjects lies the happiness of a king, in their welfare, his welfare. The king shall consider as good, not what pleases himself but what pleases his subjects' (Arthashastra). Another important concept which we come across in the ancient political tradition is the concept of Danda. Danda primarily implies the sense of coercion or punishment. Danda is required for discipline. If the laid down norms of the state which are basically determined by sacred and customary laws are not obeyed by any individual or if anybody is involved in an activity which goes against the interest of the state, the king has every right to punish the guilty. So disciplining the citizens was an important activity of the king. The Buddhist canonical literature suggests that a monarch should rule on the basis of the Law of truth and righteousness; he should not allow any wrongdoing in his kingdom and should look after the poor. A king was considered as a chosen leader of the people and his important duty was to protect his people and to punish the wrongdoers.

Tiru-k-Kural, composed by Tiruvalluvar during the second century A.D., is considered as one of the famous classics of Tamil literature. In this text, along with other facets of life, we find important ideas related to polity. It talks about an adequate army, an industrious people, ample food, resources, wise and alert ministers, alliance with foreign powers and dependable fortifications as essentials of a state. King's qualities and duties, responsibilities of the ministers, importance of spies to keep watch on various activities within the state, diplomacy, etc. are other important issues on which we find mention in the Tiru-k-Kural. 'Statecraft consists in getting support without letting your weakness be known' (Tiru-k-Kural, cited in A.Appadorai, Indian Political Thinking).

Though monarchy was predominant in the ancient Indian polity, references to republic are also found in literary traditions. Since Alexander, the Great's invasion of India in 327-324 B.C. we come across references to many places governed by oligarchies from Greek and Roman accounts of India. Later on, the Buddhist Pali canon tells us about the existence of many republics, mainly in the foothills of the Himalayas and in North Bihar. It is suggested that these were mostly tributary to the greater kingdoms but enjoyed internal autonomy. An example of this was the Sakyas who were on the borders of modern Nepal and to whom the Buddha himself belonged. Another such example was the Vrijjian confederacy of the Lichhavis who resisted the great Ajatasatru. Steve Mulilberger, in an article entitled 'Democracy in Ancient India' has written that 'in ancient India, monarchical thinking was constantly battling with another vision, of self-rule by members of a guild, a village, or an extended kin-group, in other words, any group of equals with a common set of interests. This vision of cooperative self-government often produced republicanism and even democracy comparable to classical Greek democracy.' From various accounts, the picture of north India-between the Himalayas and the Ganges-during the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. suggests the existence of a number of Janapadas and that this was also the period of growth of towns and cities in India. In the Janapadas, there were Sanghas or Ganas managing independently

their territory. Details of the working of such assemblies can be found both in Brahmanical and Buddhist literature. From Panini's account (5th B.C.), we find references to the process of decision making through voting. In the Buddhist literature, we find rules concerning the voting in monastic assemblies, their membership and their quorums. All these point to the fact that democratic values and public opinion were very much respected in ancient political tradition in spite of the dominant trend of monarchical government.

1.3 STATE AND SOVEREIGNTY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Coming of Islam in India and the establishment of the Muslim political authority marked the beginning of a distinct phase in the Indian political thought. Islamic political thought is centred around the teaching of Muhammad and the belief in the universality of the law of the Koran. In contrast to the Vedantic philosophy, the Muslims consider Koran as the only and final authority. Before the coming of Islam, the political structure in India was not based on the philosophy and belief of a single text. Rather various religious traditions contributed towards the development of political traditions in ancient India. In Islamic thought the Shariat based on the Koran is considered as the final authority and the purpose of the state is to serve the Shariat. In matters of governance, the Muslim elite were influenced by political ideas in Islam. Based on two authoritative texts written during the Muslim rule in India- *Fatwa-i-Jahandari* and *Ain-i-Akbari* dealing with the nuances of governance- we can formulate our ideas about the dominant trend of the political thought of medieval India. *Fatwa-i-Jahandari* was written by Khwaja Ziauddin Barani. In this book Barani recapitulates and further elaborates the political philosophy of the Sultanate on the basis of his earlier narrative, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*. Some scholars are of opinion that Barani's ideas carry a sense of religious fanaticism. Keeping in mind the fact that Barani belonged to a period when Islam was just making its ground in India, we may overlook this limitation in Barani's ideas. Apart from this limitation, Barani's ideas related to kingship in medieval period are of immense importance. The king as the representative of God on earth is considered as the source of all powers and functions of the state. Barani is of the opinion that whatever means the king adopts to discharge his duties is justified so long as his aim is the service of religion. In the following passage, we find Barani's suggestions to the king as to how to discharge his functions as the head of the state.

According to Al Barani, "It is the duty of the Sultans before they have made up their minds about an enterprise or policy and published it among the people, to reflect carefully on the likelihood of its success and failure as well as its effects on their position, on the religion and the state, and on the army. In Barani's opinion the king should devote himself to governance of his state in such a way that helps him in reaching nearer to God. Welfare of the religion and the state should be the ideal of a good state. A king should be guided by wise men. Bureaucracy is required to run the administration and Barani is an advocate of blue blood aristocracy. He talks about the necessity of hierarchy in administration and points out the composition, classification, nature and relation of bureaucracy with the Sultan and the people of the state. He is emphatically against the promotion of low-born men. He writes that 'The noble born men in the king's court will bring him honour, but if he favours low born men, they will disgrace him in both the worlds'. He says that kingship is based on two pillars- administration and conquest and it is on the army that both the pillars depend. He also emphasises on king's concern regarding internal security and foreign relations.

Alongwith the enforcement of the Shariat, to Barani, dispensing of justice is an essential function of a sovereign. Implementation of law and obedience to law should be the primary concern of a king. Barani refers to four sources of law: a) the Koran b) the **Hadish** (traditions of prophet) c) the **Ijma** (opinions and rulings of the majority of Muslim theologians and d) **Qiyas** (speculative method of deduction). To this he added **Zawabit** or state law as an important source of law in administering the state. With the changing complexion of **society** and the growing complexities of administration in addition to the accepted principles of traditional Islamic law, Barani advocated for **Zawabit** or the state laws whose foundation is non-religious. State laws cannot be contradictory to the orders of the Shariat **and** its primary objective is to regulate the works of various governmental departments and to foster loyalty. Barani also **talks** about the recognition of individual rights, i.e. the rights of wife, children, old servants, slaves, etc. and he considers the recognition of people's rights as the basis of the state. Punishment was considered as an essential means to maintain **discipline** in the state. Barani refers to various circumstances of the punishments, particularly the death punishment to be awarded by the king. The real importance of **Fatwa-i-Jahandari** lies in the fact that it shows in what ways the original Islamic theory of kingship went through changes over the years in the Indian context. Barani's vast experience in the working of the **Delhi Sultanate** and the prevailing social order get reflected in his political ideas.

The other valuable text on statecraft explaining the dominant trend of political ideas during the Mughal rule in India is **Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari***. Abul Fazl was one of the most important thinkers of the sixteenth century India. Being a great scholar having sound knowledge of different fields of learning in the Muslim and the Hindu traditions, he had contributed in formulating many of Akbar's political ideas. Abul Fazl was influenced by the idea of the divine nature of royal power. He made a distinction between a true king and a selfish ruler. A true king should not be concerned much about himself and power, rather people's well being should be his **prime** concern. To him, an ideal sovereign is like a father who rules for the common welfare and is guided by the law of God. Though Abul Fazl believed in 'the divine light of royalty', he did not envisage any role for the intermediaries to communicate the divine **order**. Abul Fazl says, 'Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun....Modern language calls this light *farri izidi* (the divine light) and the tongue of antiquity called it *kiyan khwarah* (the sublime halo). It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of any one'. The Ulemas and the Mujtahids, like the Brahmins in Hinduism, acted as authority and interpreter of customary laws to king. But in Abul Fazl's formulation, the intermediaries are not required to interpret religious and holy law and the king himself is expected to judge and interpret holy law. Abul Fazl writes that 'when the time of reflection comes, and men shake off the prejudices of their education, the thread of the web of religious blindness break and the eye sees the glory of harmoniousness...**although some are enlightened** many would observe silence from fear of fanatics who lust for blood, but look like men.... The people will naturally look to their king and expect **him** to be their spiritual leader as well, for a king possesses, independent of men, the ray of divine wisdom, which banishes from his heart everything that is conflicting. A king will, therefore, sometimes observe the element of harmony in a **multitude** of things.... Now this is the case with the monarch of the present age. He now is the spiritual guide of the nation'. At the core of his political ideas was the belief that the king should be guided by the principles of universal good and to fulfill his royal duty, he could go beyond the holy law. This was a significant shift in matters of governance compared to earlier political thinking. The reforms introduced by

Akbar through the abolition of *jizya* collected from the non-Muslims or a ban on cow slaughter reflected the spirit of new political theory articulated in *Ain-i-Akbari*. Abul Fazl was a believer in strong centralised monarchical government and for better governance he advocated the distribution of works among various departments. It was with the help of a highly centralised bureaucracy that the Mughal sovereign ruled over the empire. Abul Fazl's classified society into a four tier system, where rulers and warriors occupied the first position. Learned people were placed in the second category, artisans and merchants in the third and the labourers belonged to the fourth category. Although this was not based on an, egalitarian philosophy he talked about the importance of each category for the welfare of the state. Thus the picture of political authority that emerges from the study of *Ain-i-Akbari* was of a centralised monarchy and the governing principle of the state was the well being of its people.

1.4 RELIGION AND POLITY

Discussion on the pre-modern Indian political thought will remain incomplete if we do not take into account the relationship between religion and polity. Let us begin with the views shared by Gandhi and Maulana Azad regarding religion and politics. Gandhi said that those who talk about the separation of religion and politics do not know what religion is. Maulana Azad wrote, that 'There will be nothing left with us if we separate politics from religion'. It is interesting to note that these two great Indian thinkers belonged to two different religious traditions but both were of the opinion that religion cannot be separated from politics. It may be little bewildering as to how we can claim secularism as the guiding principle of the Indian political tradition. It may sound contradictory but if we analyse carefully, the inner meaning of political ideas expressed in our various religious traditions, it would be clear to us as to how religion and state are integrated in our political philosophy. The history of India shows that ours is a unique civilisation which has, over the years, accommodated various religious traditions. In every religion, whether it is Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism or Christianity, with the evolution of society and new developments, various sects emerged having differences in expressing their loyalty to the almighty. However these differences were not meant for establishing one's superiority over the other. Each religion talks about moral values and one's duty towards the other and the society at large. References to the virtues of honesty, humility, selflessness, compassion for the poor, etc. are scattered in the teachings of various religious orders. In the sections on ancient and medieval polity, which we have discussed in this unit, you might have noticed that the cardinal principle of kingship as suggested by various texts was to take care of the interests of his subjects. Nowhere the distinction has been made among subjects along religious lines although there might have been individual rulers who deviated from this principle. Those deviations should be considered as aberrations rather than the guiding principles of kingship, Here it would be pertinent to refer to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan who said that 'the religious impartiality of the Indian State is not to be confused with secularism or atheism. Secularism as here defined is in accordance with the ancient religious tradition of India. It tries to build up a fellowship of believers, not by subordinating individual qualities to the group mind but by bringing them into harmony with each other. This fellowship is based on the principle of diversity in unity which alone has the quality of creativeness'. (S.Radhakrishnan, *Recovery of Faith*, 1956). The point to be noted here is that the meaning of secularism is based on our religious tradition. When we look at our past, we find that in the days of Brahmanical domination, a section of our society started

looking for alternative ways to realise the ultimate truth and this search resulted in the emergence of Jainism and Buddhism. Many people including the ruling authority welcomed the new religious traditions. Similarly when Islam came to India there might have been attempts by a few to make Islam, state religion but we find that the same period witnessed the growth of Sufism or Akbar's Tauhid-i-Ilahi (called Din-i-Ilahi) which focused on universalism. The same period is important for the growth of Bhakti movement. The Bhakti doctrine preached human equality which is considered as direct impact of Islamic thought. It dreamt of a society based on justice and equality in which men of all creeds would be able to develop their full moral and spiritual stature. The Sufi orders had an influence on the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, and among the followers of Guru Nanak were both Hindus and Muslims. A Muslim chronicler of Shivaji wrote that Shivaji, during military campaign, tried to avoid any insulting action against the Muslims 'and if a copy of the Quran was captured by his soldiers, it was supposed to be respectfully restored to the Muslims'. (Muhammad Hashim Khafi Khan, Muntakhab Lubab, Tr. by J. Dawson, 1960). There will be no dearth of references in our various religious traditions to suggest that at the core of our various traditions lies the spirit of tolerance, universalism and compassion for the humanity. These teachings from religious traditions are expected to be the guiding principles of governance. Rajdharma suggests more about the sovereign's responsibility towards his subjects rather than misuse of power given to the sovereign by his subjects. It is within this framework that one should try to interpret the coexistence of religion and polity in India rather than finding the meaning of secular state as state divorced from religion. So when many modern political thinkers give importance to religion in their political philosophy, we must try to understand its significance in proper historical perspective. At the same time one has to be cautious about the misuse of religious sentiments for particular sectarian interest.

1.5 SUMMARY

The unit deals broadly with the evolution of the Indian political thought till the time of modern period. We have discussed the emergence of state and how various texts explained in detail about the role of the sovereign. Monarchy was no doubt the predominant form of government but within it the roles of its various constituents have been clearly spelt out. Concept of bureaucracy, welfare state, individual rights, and public opinion, mentioned in various texts, give the impression of a very developed scientific thinking prevailing in our early traditions. Values and morality were given more importance to individual likings in the matters of governance. Cutting across time, the dominant ideology of the state was to protect the interest of its people. Religious idealism was given prominence to promote harmony and universalism within the state. In the backdrop of this discussion, we will now move on to the development of the modern Indian political thought.

1.6 EXERCISES

1. Explain the major features of political ideas in Ancient India.
2. Discuss the important ideas regarding sovereign authority during the Medieval period.
3. In what way has religion influenced the polity in pre-modern India?