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Elements of Political Science in Ancient India: Reflections on Mahabharata and Manusmriti

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Abstract

Mahabharata and Manusmriti both these texts are considered as the precious gems of Indian political tradition. They are really an encyclopedias of Indian intellectual tradition in which social, moral, ethical, economical and political conditions are described extensively. After studying these texts a lots of materials related with the political science comes out. Because of this they are considered as the core texts of Indian Politics. They deal with many elements of political sciences such as State and its constituents, Statecraft, government, Democracy, Republics, Judiciary etc and these elements have also relevance in present time. The purpose of the present paper is to carve out the elements of political science in ancient Indian texts like; Mahabharata and Manusmriti.

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Introduction:-

In the history of political thought, Indian political thought represents the East. While many countries like, China, Japan, Russia and South East countries have developed rudimentary thoughts of political, India, like ancient Greek, developed a political thought in ancient times which may still be favorably compared with some of the most political thoughts in the world.

Therefore, the study of the political thought is a necessary prelude to understanding Indian political problems. The researchers from East and West looking through the spectacles of the Western political thought, have more than often missed the real spirit of Indian political concepts. It is obviously wrong to compare Machiavelli, to *Chanakya* to understand the Indian Political Philosophy. The current concepts of Western cannot be directly applied to in the analysis of Indian Polity. Indian political thinkers have developed their own tools and concepts to understand the Indian political fabric and infrastructure. Ancient Indian Political thoughts have been significantly represented by the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavadgita*. The political thoughts found in the great epics *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, is comprehensive and more complex. The *Manusmriti*, along with other *Smritis*, dealt with every political Institution and entire scenery of human life vertically and horizontally. The vertical concept of State and the horizontal perspective lead to the concept of Dharma. Both these concepts were supported equally by philosophy and science. Therefore it is not wonder that contemporary Indian political thinkers have unanimously appreciated *Rajadharma* as the sound basis of polity. Here the main concern is to show out the elements of Political science in the great texts namely; the *Mahabharata* and the *Manusmriti*, considered as the great texts of ancient Indian Polity.

1. Elements of Political Science in Mahabharata:

In addition to *Vedas*, the *Vedas* the *Upanishads*, the *Aranyakas* and *Brahmana* texts, the great epics can also be treated as ancient Indian Political literature. These two main epic are *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Here the main reflection is given to *Mahabharata*. So it is necessary to consider *Mahabharata*. *Mahabharata* has been called an *Itihasa*. And there is a controversy with regards to this ascription, because it does not always conform to the modern definition of history. But *Itihasa* is an Indian term and it should be accepted in the Indian context. The definition

*dharmArthakAmamokshANAm updeshasamanvitam/
pUrvavrittakathAyuktam itihAsam pracakshate||*

has been accepted on all hands in our country. Kautilya Vishnugupta's definition "*purANam itivrittam AkhyAyikodAharNam dharmashAstram arthshAstram ce'titihAsaH*" also conforms to the above. The *Mahabharata* has been accepted by as the best of *ItihAsa*. It is regarded as the supplement to *Vedas- ItihAsa purANAbhyAm vedaM samupbrimhyet*.¹ Nay, it has itself been called the fifth Veda. Itihasa and Purana were regarded as indispensable aids to the comprehensive of the Vedas.

In fact, the *Mahabharata* exposes the Vedic secrets in a good. The Vedic topics have been retold, explained and illustrated in it. Beside these it is known as *DharmashAstra*, *ArthshAstra* and *KAmashAstra*.² There is much truth in Vyasa's challenges that "That which occurs here about *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* (the four ends of human life) occurs elsewhere and that, which does not occur here, occurs nowhere else."³ It is considered as an encyclopaedia of Indian intellectual Tradition in which social, moral, ethical and economical conditions are described.⁴

Beside these, *Mahabharata* is also valuable from the political point of view. It deals with many political facts and abundant materials are available on political science in it. And it also speaks a vast number of masters of political science and their contributions the present political theories and speculations which may through welcome light on the present day political problems also discussed in it. In *Mahabharata* the most important part, from the political viewpoint is the *Shanti Parva*, in which a theory of punishment (Danda) is advanced as a political theory or the science of Government.⁵

In general, Indian thinkers have regarded the power of punishment as the characteristics of the State, although they have consistently stressed the use of punishment exclusively for public welfare. Temporally, punishment originated earlier than the state. This important realization proves that punishment was universal, that the State was not created to implement it, nor was punishment evolved to make the functional. This makes clear that long before the emergence of the state, punishment existed for the purpose of maintaining social organization.

State in Mahabharata:-

According to *Shanti Parva*, lord *Vishnu* first created monumental text on life and administration and then established a king, government and state. This implies that the power should not be used as a means by State; instead, the State should be considered a means whereby power is centralized so as to help in the maintenance of social organization. *Shanti Parva* of *Mahabharata* refers to different kinds of state and there many terms like *RAjya*, *RAshtra*, *Janapada*⁶ and *Pura*⁷ are used for denoting the State. There state is considered as machinery to ensure the peace and order in society.

In this way from very ancient times to the present day, the State has always been a means to public welfare in India. *Vishnu's* text on Political science mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, gives an account not merely of the rules pertaining to governance by the State but also of governing relation between States. The study of these rules clarifies the fact that they are inspired by humanist sentiment, tolerance has given to the special significance. According to *Mahabharata* administration is a part of the normal social organization. The duty of State is established the *Varna-ashram* system. The State should create such an organization in which every individual should be able to perform the duties appropriate to his status and stages of life.

¹ Mahabharata., Adi Parva., 1, 19,26,

² *ArthashAstramidaM proktaM dharmashAstramidaM mahat/
kAmashAstramidaM proktaM vyAsenAmitabuddhinA|| Mbh. Adi., 2.383*

³ *Dharme cArthe ca mokhee ca kAme ca bhartarshabhaH /
yadihAstitadanyatra yannehAsti na tatkvacit || Ibid., I,62, 53*

⁴ *Politics and Ethics in Ancient India*, p. 14

⁵ *Shanti Parva ka Alochanatmaka Adyayana*, p.17.

⁶ *Shanti Parva.*, 69.1,10,65

⁷ *Shanti Parva*, 67.2,3,5,6.

Theory of origin of state:

In the Vana parva of *Mahabharata*, it has been shown that in ancient period, the life of the people was exceptionally happy and contended. The *Shanti Parva* also provides a glowing description of the life and the period.⁸ However there comes a gradual deterioration in human relations as a result of which the god feels profound grief, which compelled them to approach the god *Vishnu*. *Vishnu* did not want to give supreme authority to any individual. So with his power he brought in to existence a king whom he called *Virajas*. But the dynasty of *Virajas*, a corrupt ruler named Vena came to be born. Divinity again intervened and took away Vena's power and handed it over to his son who was eager to use the administration for the public weal.⁹ The *Shanti Parva* provides a detailed account of advice given to Vena's son *Prithu* by gods and seers. In this way the theory of origin of State in *Mahabharata* postulates the concept not merely men but even the gods consider it necessary to dispose him and to replace him, with one who devoted to his fundamental duty.

Political Institutions and harmony in them:-

In the *Mahabharata*, the greatest importance has been given to everywhere to the State and its Constituents (*swami, amatya, janapada, durga, kosha, danda and mitra*¹⁰) and their co-operation is necessary for the proper functioning of the State and all these are considered as the political institutions, without which the existence of state is impossible. The proper functioning of the state and the administration required the mutual co-operation of the *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*. But equally important was the creation of harmonious relation between these two classes on the hand and *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras* on the other. In this way, as is the case on with the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, in *Mahabharata* too, harmony or synthesis has been considered important for political Organization. All of them support the theory of welfare state, because its objective is security and happiness. In all these texts the king's duty is assumed to be the establishment of social harmony, its relevance without which he cannot administer the State. The State must create conditions which are conducive to the achievement of the values of *Dharma, Artha* and *Kama*.

Democracy in Mahabharata:-

Of the several systems of government witnessed in the vast expanse of Indian History, that of benevolent autocracy has been suited to the genius of the country. It has been guided by the best brains and has been based upon a code of conduct evolved through the age-old national experience during the different phases of our culture. The *Mahabharata* offers elaborate accounts of all its relevant aspects and advocates its safe assumption to the exclusion of others in *Shanti parva* in particular. The *Mahabharata* along with *Khila Harivamsha* offers highly valuable information's about the *Republican* tenants. In a conversation between *Bhishma* and *Yudhishthira* both the advantages of the *republics* have been recounted. *Yudhishthira* wants to know from the grand old historians how *Ganas* can flourish remain United, conquer enemies and acquired allies, when they are usually confronted with the great advantages: (i) they fell easy victim to the internal dissensions and (ii) it is very difficult for them to keep the state policies a close secret.¹¹

It may be noted here that these advantages confront the present day *republics* also including our own. *Bhishma* had presented his views on these problems by saying that greed and intolerance among the citizens are the two important enemies in the republican state and republican society just as those on the part of the Prince in Princely State. In the *Shanti Parva* of *Mahabharata* *gaNarAjya*¹² is considered by many scholars as the form of republics. Some holds that *Ganas* were aristocracies or oligarchies probably in the grounds that *Ganas* power was vested not in the whole body of citizens but in a small aristocratic class. It would be however, better to translate the word as *republics*, the *Shanti Parva* of *Mahabharata* hints at a trend of ultra republicanism by saying that there were kings in every house who were interested in their own welfare.¹³

⁸ na vai rAjyaM rAjasInna ca daNDo na dAnDikaH/

dharmeNaiva prajAH sarva rakshanti sma parasparaM||Shanti Parva., 59, 13-14

⁹ Shanti Parva.,59.98-130

¹⁰ Shanti Parva, 69.64

¹¹ Shanti Parva., 107.7 (se also the whole chapter 107 is devoted to gaNarAjya)

¹² gaNanAM ca kulAnAM ca rAgyAM bharatsattama/

vairsandIpanAvetao lobhAmarsho narAdhipaH|| Shanti Parva, 107. 10.

¹³ Shanti Parva., 107.

To brief, it can be said that *Mahabharata* refers to the republics and in such a republican State power was exercised not by individual, but by many was organized by the Kula basis. In this way, although the *Mahabharata* supports autocracy of kingship in the sphere of political thought, in practice this autocracy was not inferior to a democratic organization. In the Shanti Parva as stated above *Bhishma* as hinted at the various difficulties implicit that democracy did not find support. However, harmony between the various organs of the state was considered as the basis of politics, even in a theoretic system, though it is seen often as a characteristic of democracy. Thus it will not be erroneous to say that the great Indian text *Mahabharata* deals with many political elements and they are also valuable from modern point of view.

2. Elements of Political Science in Manusmriti:

In the history of Indian political thought, the period succeeding the epic period is the period of the *Smritis*. In this period, the ancient harmony gradually defined. In this period social and moral laws became more rigid. The *Smritis* are collection of these laws. Whereas equality was a feature of various *Varnas* in society during the ancient period, in the period of the *Smritis*, the *Brahmanas*, and *Kshatriyas* were given greater importance. The most important among these *smritis*, is the *Manusmriti*. Its importance from the humanist view point is establishment by the fact that it is called “*mAnavadharma shAstra*”. *Manusmriti* provides a detailed analysis of almost every aspect of human life. In addition to psychology, ethics and philosophy, it provides valuable information on political science, such as justice and law.¹⁴ The characteristics of Dharma elaborated in the second chapter of *Manusmriti* are the features of *Varna dharma*. The third chapter elaborates the Ashram system. The fourth chapter gives a detailed picture of *Grihastha Ashrama*, on the period of domestic life.

From the view point of the Political science, the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters are more important and even among these last two have special significance. *Manusmriti* deals with many political elements; they are the King, the State, statecraft and Judiciary etc.

King (government):-

In the seventh chapter, Manu indulges in a subtle analysis of the various aspect of the State. First of all the duties of the king are elaborately discussed. According to Manu, the king has been created to protect the *VarNashrama* system. Hence, he has considered in detail the functions as well as the non functions of the king, along with his qualities and shortcomings. In addition to the king such other organs of state as minister's diplomats or ambassadors, heads of villages etc. have been considered in detail. The principles underlying the appointment of ministers and the justice of such considerations have been explained.¹⁵

Decentralization of the power:-

Manu is also of the some view on decentralization of the state. His elaboration about the duties of the head of a village indicates that he supported decentralization. Each village had a state functionary whose activities were supervised by the ministers.

Statecraft:-

Manu also concerns with the statecraft and its ideologies. There corrupt officials were subject to serve penalties. There were provisions for collecting taxes from the tenders and others. Heavy taxation of sculpture was prohibited. *Manusmriti* explains the importance of safeguarding the public. The characteristics of a friend, an enemy and an alienated person have been described. The methods and occasions for treatise and war have been analyzed. Detailed rules of war have been suggested also. The duties of the king subsequent upon a war have also been considered. Rules concerning the king's diet, his mode of life etc. have been made explicit. In this way Manu has been provided a very detailed picture of the various aspects of king's life and duties.

System of justice:-

The eighth chapter of *Manusmriti* provides a detailed analysis of the system of Justice. Manu has laid down different forms of punishment, for different types of the criminals belonging to different *Varnas*. He makes provision of judgment on criminal action by the Brahmins in the absence of the king. The duty of state towards immoral woman has been specified. A detailed system of punishment has been made explicit for such crimes as theft, looting, rape,

¹⁴ Sharma, Urmila & Sharma, S.K., *Indian Poltical Thought*, p.7

¹⁵ *Manusmriti*, VII.

cheating in trade etc. There is provision for difference forms of punishment for the person of different castes, committing the same crimes because according to Manu's system, the duty of a person in society corresponds to his rights.

In this way *Manusmriti* makes mention of a human religion and assuming politics to be a prominent aspect of human life, its principle have been made explicit, in spite of these *Manusmriti* also reflects all the characteristics of humanist attitude of Indian political thought, apart its Brahmanism. It assumes the existence of unity in diversity in the Universe; it takes of basing society on duties. Many other valuable elements of political are also discussed in *Manusmriti* such as divine right of the king etc.

The dispensation of the justice was known as *Vyavahara*. This word has been defined by *Manusmriti* and also by other texts. V.K. Apte has quoted several *Dharmashastras* while defining the term 'Vyavahara' in these words, the *upasarga* 'vi' is employed in the sense of various, 'ava' in the sense of doubt, 'hara' means removing, *Vyavahara* is so called because of its removing various doubts.¹⁶ P.V. Kane has defined *Vyavahara* as law and administration of Justice.¹⁷ Many other things related with Justice such as, *Vyavahara pada* (athana¹⁸). Machinery of justice dispensation, original courts and appealed tribunal, the chief justice and his associates, control over judges kinds of the court of justice, constituents of courts, division in dispute matters are the major problem. *Manusmriti* describes all these problems in arranged manner.

Then we reach to conclusion that like Plato, the author of *Manusmriti* sought to maintain a balance and harmony between different parts of society. Thus, the aim was socio- progress. In *Manusmriti*, Dharma has been considered to be control to social organization. Indeed Manu says that Dharma sustains and preserves the society. It discusses in detail about Dharma.

Hence, it can be said that *Manusmriti* is the most reliable and important text on polity. It forms the foundations of social order, deals with different aspects of life and administration clearly mentioned the qualities of King, ministers and judges. *Manusmriti* has also given the importance to the maintenance of the inter-national relations between different states.

Conclusion:-

Thus, we find that both *Mahabharata* and *Manusmriti* are the pioneer texts of the ancient Indian polity, in which the political elements and thoughts are described in a proper way. Because of their richness in the political aspects both are considered as the major texts of Hindu political thoughts. It has been properly argued that in ancient India, the different branches of knowledge were grouped under the four heads, economics and politics of these were regarded as a very important subject of the study.¹⁹ Sri Aurobindo was very clear in this direction when he said that "there was a strong democratic element, if we must use the western terms in Indian polity an even institutions that presents a certain analogy to the parliamentary forms."²⁰ Thus I have tried to summarize the points having emphatic in the famous texts, *Mahabharata* and *Manusmriti*. These texts revealed some interesting dimensions of ancient Indian polity.

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¹⁶ Apte, V.M., p. 283, *Manu*, VIII, 1.

¹⁷ Kane, P.V., *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol.II, p.248

¹⁸ *Manusmriti*, VIII, p. 8.

¹⁹ Banerjee, Pramathanath, *Public Administration in Ancient India*, p.1

²⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Spirit and the Form of Indian Polity*, Calcutta, 1947, p.5

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