

The Features of Ancient Indian Political Thought:

Followings are the features of Indian Political thought:

Influence of Ethics:

The social thought in ancient India not only assures certain fundamental principle of morality, but it always seeks to direct the material life as well. The king must consciously stimulate virtue and act as a guide to the moral life, morality as stipulated in the Dharmasastras.

The state figures considerably in the communal life and the theory of life proceeds to resolve itself into a theory of morality. In short, political science becomes the ethics of the whole society, a science of the duty of man found in the complex set of relations in society.

But when it comes to international relations, one can see the ethical meanings coming to terms with the hard reality. Dealing about diplomacy, Kautilya for example, becomes realistic in a manner similar to Machiavelli. One may notice a sudden fall from ethical heights to the rankest realism in the same writer.

Government as a Partnership of the Upper Varnas:

In ancient India, the Kshatriyas, Brahmanas and later the Vaisyas together formed the ruling class. The Shudras were the serving class. 'Kshatra' – the temporal power derived its strength and authority from 'Brahma' – the spiritual power. The Vaisya engaged in such occupations as agriculture and trade provided the economic basis of the state. The priest held the highest status. He was identified with the God 'Brihaspathy' instead of the temporal power 'India'. His function was to interpret dharma and preside over the rituals.

Coronation by the priest was a necessary pre-requisite to the exercise of royal power. Symbolically, it meant that the Kshatriya derived his power from the Brahman.

The priest was the chief adviser to the king. Interestingly, unlike in Europe, priesthood in India did not contend for temporal power, a phenomenon that raged in Europe for a considerably long period. The influence exercised by the priestly class was of a peculiar kind. They had the monopoly of education and were the sole interpreters of dharma. No one, not even the king could go beyond their prescription. With its intellectual leadership of the community and religious control, there was no need for the priestly class to organise itself into a church or any such spiritual organization.

The Influence of Caste based Social Structure on Politics:

Caste occupied a prominent place in all social speculation during the later Vedic period and had a direct bearing on the theory of government.

Varnashramadharama in the society was fixed on the basis of caste. Each Varna was assigned specific functions. It was the foremost duty of the king to see that every individual confined himself to performing functions of the Varna to which he was born. Caste was an ascribed status. The individual was not to seek his own interest or expression; he was not to determine his own ambition or ends. Varnashramadharama exalted the society at the cost of human values. Much that was personal gave way to collective elements.

Not all castes or varnas were equally privileged in their enjoyment of rights and duties assigned to them. The super varnas – Brahmanas and Kshatriyas – were the ruling class. The duty of an individual was social. Since the varnas were related to each other in such a fashion that together they constituted the social order, if an individual transgressed his duty, he not only violated the order, he, in fact, became antisocial.

It was in this way that the Hindu theory would overcome the anti-thesis of man v/s state or society.

Political Life conceived within the framework of Dharma:

One cannot find in ancient India any classes exclusively dealing with political and social life, which is comparable to the 'Republic' and the 'Politics' of Plato and Aristotle. A supernatural element is present in all the writings. The divine is omnipotent and is visible in the formation of society and government; the divine purpose is to be enforced by the king, divine punishment reinforces earthly punishment and sometimes supplants it.

This is what we find in almost all the texts that deal with the life of the people. But one should not be led to believe the reality. There was a wide gap between the 'sastras', traditions and the actual lives of human beings.

The brahminical religion, which is commonly taken as the Hindu religion, was not all-pervasive. There were non-Brahminical traditions, which were materialistic in nature and which played an important role in guiding the activities of ordinary people. Buddhist contribution is significant in this respect.

No Clear Distinction between State and Society:

The governmental organization and politics were looked at as a part of the larger whole called society. In other words, society was at once religious, political, economical and military. It was generally viewed in a comprehensive manner. The habit of looking at

society from a political angle was not cultivated. As a result, there was no clear conception of either the state or the government. Both were interchangeable terms.

Monarchy was the normal form of Government:

Since the four fold division of society entrusted the ruling power with the Kshatriya caste, monarchy was the natural outcome. There were also non-monarchical forms of government. Kautilya's Arthashastra for example, mentions 'dvairajya' (rule by two kings) 'vyrajya' (state without a king) etc., There were also 'ganasanghas' which according to K. P. Jayaswal are comparable to modern republics. But still monarchy was the normal form of government. Though there were non-monarchical forms, they were more of an exception rather than a rule.

The Government was not sovereign:

From its very nature of existence, the government in ancient India could not be regarded as sovereign in the Austinian sense of the term. It did not impart validity to the orders; rather, it shared in its validity.

On the contrary, the government had no independent existence of its own. The sustenance of the social order was merely its function. Sovereignty was, in fact, ultimately sourced in the divine will. On the part of the individual, there was no unified allegiance, no single loyalty except to society as a whole. ; Only the pluralistic theory of sovereignty can grasp the Indian phenomenon.

Other Distinguishing Features:

Apart from the above mentioned characteristics, Professor Bhikhu Parekh mentions some other distinguishing features of the Hindu political traditions. They are:

First, the Hindu tradition is basically in-egalitarian. Although it developed the idea of the moral equality of all men, it never developed the social, legal and political groups.

Second, the Hindu tradition of political thought is pluralistic in orientation. The Hindu political writers from the very beginning recognized the autonomy of social groups.

Third, political thought in early India was largely uncritical and apologetic of the established social order. Most Hindu writers justified the caste system as the caste based conception of dharma, the largely fatalist concept of karma, the degradation of the Shudras and the slaves, the extensive moral interference of the state and so on. It ignored the whole area of social conflict.

Fourth, many Hindu writers wrote mainly for the attention of the rulers. Their works are largely manuals of ethics or administration; hence, it is largely didactic and practical.