Research Paper

Hindu Tradition of Political Thought: An Overview

Bilal Ahmad Ganai

Assistant Professor of Political Science, School of Legal Studies, Central University of Kashmir

ABSTRACT: *The Hindu tradition of political thought is unique in so many ways. There are so many easily identifiable markers in Indian knowledge tradition which set it apart from the western tradition of political thought. The political thinking in India has been original and rich. The concept of state in India is situated both in the Dharmashastric as well as Arthashastric traditions. The State is supposed to work for the goals set by the dharmshastras and achieve the same through the instrumentality of arthshastras. The local, national and international levels of politics are intertwined in this scheme so much so that one is incomplete without the other. It is within this backdrop that the present paper has examined some of the broad contours of Hindu tradition of political though and put them in relationship with each other.*
KEYWORDS: *Dharma, Danda, Hindu Philosophy, Politics, State, International Relations.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The present day Hindu political and social ethos is rooted in Vedas. Vedic systems of thinking constitute the foundational templates of the Hindu civilizational matrix. Vedas and all other works which were inspired by *Vedas*, in fact, remain the fountain head of all the indigenous knowledge (thinking) traditions of India. The first known formulation of Hindu philosophy surfaced in the *Vedic* scriptures and the next during the legendary wars of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* when presumably one era of history merged into another (Mehta, 1996, p. 10).

The Hindu tradition of political thought, one could say, is not an exception to this general characterization of India's knowledge traditions. Accordingly, any sincere academic effort for discussing and analyzing the conceptualization of the different political ideas in this part of the world is definitely incomplete without grounding them in this ancient Vedic intellectual tradition. However, India's indigenous knowledge traditions have their own chequered history as for a long time not much academic attention was paid to them in general and the Hindu tradition of political thought in particular. In fact, earlier the scholars did not treat Hindu tradition of political thinking as worth for any serious academic attention. The euro-centricity was dominant. Only European and American ideological systems were being treated as worth for being taught in universities. Accordingly the Indian political ideas did not find any respectable place in the syllabi of various courses on political philosophy. It is only when academicians began thinking in the idiom of decolonization of political thought in India that they started offering courses in Indian political thought in the universities and other research centres. Thomas Pantham confirms it in the following lines, "in fact, until recently, most Indian universities did not have a course on modern Indian political thought. The recent interest in indigenous political thinking has led to the introduction of courses on it in almost all Indian universities" (Pantham, 1986, 9-16).

II. FOUNDATIONAL THEMES

Hindu political thinkers described the systematic study of political life by various names. Some of the names for the systematic study of political life used earlier were Rajadharma, Dandaniti, Nitisastra and Arthasastra. The Panchatantra in its opening verse calls this branch of knowledge as Nrpasastra (Science of Kings): Kamandaka's treatise is called Nitisara; Vaisampayan's work is entitled Nitiprakasika; the Puranas have used Rajaniti, Chandeswara has given the name Rajaniti Ratnakar to his work; and Kshtravidya occurs in the Chhandogya Upanishad (Sharan, 1983). However, a common thread runs through all these works as all of them have conceptualized political life in terms of two central concepts namely, danda and dharma (Parekh, 1986). The entire Hindu political philosophy, thus, revolves around these two basic ideas. Dharma, per se, has intrinsic value. It is given in its essence and divine in its nature. Danda, as per Hindu political philosophers has an

---

instrumental value and punitive characteristic. Danda mainly functions as corrective and disciplinary apparatus of the state. The entire Indian political philosophy thus can be reduced to two primordial principles (Sarkar, 1921):

1. No danda, no state
2. (a) No state, no dharma; (b) No state, no property

These two ideas lay the basic foundations of the Indian political and social system. Therefore, for understanding the nucleus of Hindu political philosophy, the analysis of these two concepts becomes imperative. Let us now try to do a step by step analysis.

III. DHARMA: MEANING AND NATURE

Dharma is the heart of Hindu political tradition. The word dharma is not translatable into English as there is no equivalent word for dharma in the English language. *Dharma* is one of the most significant concepts of the Hindu tradition of political thought. Dharma means various things. *Dharma* means virtue, right action, the law of nature, accordance with what is proper, universal truth, a code of customs and traditions, righteousness, the eternal, unchanging order, law and variation of all these (Sharan, 1983). *Dharma* is thus a measuring rod for all the things and standards. One possible mistake that we have to ward off is equating *Dharma* with the notion of religion. *Dharma* is not a religion as such. We should understand the difference between the two. *Dharma* stands apart from all the Abrahamic religions of this world. *Dharma*, not being a religion, has a wider and deeper meaning as compared to the three major Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Nicholas F. Gier identifies the following major differences between dharma and Abrahamic religions:

1. Abrahamic prophets claimed to have had direct communication with God and were very much concerned with following his commands, while Asian devotees rarely spoke about what God actually said for us to do.
2. The Abrahamic religions are primarily more concerned with maintaining the purity of divine revelation while the dharmic traditions of India have generally allowed and even welcomed other religious influences.
3. The Abrahamic God has usually been viewed as a transcendent "other", while Asian divinities have generally been viewed as immanent in each person.

Etymologically, the word *Dharma* has been derived from the Sanskrit root *Dhr* meaning "to hold", "to be firm or support." Atharva Veda reads *Prithivim Dharmana Dhritam* which translates as, "this world is upheld by Dharma". In the Valmiki Ramayana, Sita said to Rama – "*Dharma* begets *Artha* (wealth) and *Dharma* also generates *Sukha* (happiness). From *Dharma* is acquired everything. Dharma is the real quintessence of life. Dharma is the essence of this universe". The earlier version of *Dharma* was known as Rta. The most ancient concept of law which is found in the *Rig-Veda* is represented by the word *Rta*. This word denotes the supreme transcendental law or the cosmic order which rules the universe, and to which even the gods owe allegiance (Gajrani and Kumar, 2014).

Dr. P.V. Kāṇe writes the concept of Rta thus became synonymous with the organized principle of the universe and the divine ordering of the earthly life. The relationship between rta and dharma is unclear. It is felt that the earlier term referred to natural causality (in nature) and the latter refers specifically to "moral concerns" of the human world (Mehta, 1996, p. 10).

Dharma is, therefore, something which cements a group of human beings in such a way so that they are able to live in a sustainable and spiritually uplifting and liberating way. Since the Hindus thought a society was held together by each individual and group doing his or its specific duties, they used the term to mean duties (Parekh, 1986). This explains the duty–centric model of political thinking that India has evolved as against the rights – centric model of political thinking in the west. The term dharma is subject to many usages. It has been subject to varied interpretations: law; justice; virtue; righteousness; right action as described above. P.V. Kāṇe (1941, p. 2) defines *Dharma* as under:

> The conception of dharma was a far-reaching one embracing the whole life of man. The writers on dharmasastra meant by dharma not a creed or religion but a mode of life or a code of conduct, which regulated a man's work and activities as a member of society and as an individual and was intended to bring about the gradual development of a man and to enable him to reach what was deemed to be the goal of human existence.

V.R. Mehta writes in his book *Foundations of Indian Political Thought*:

> A Vedic hero, when acting according to dharma, acted with best of motives, directed to a well-being beyond himself and assumed total responsibility for his motives and intentions...

In *Aitareya Brahmana*, *Dharma* is used in an abstract sense as the whole body of religious duties (Pūrva-Mīmāṁsā). The *Vaisesika Sutra* defines it as something from which results happiness and final beatitude.

Dharma is therefore the originator of the political organization of a society. It becomes the mother of all the laws within a society. It necessitates the constitutionalization of the certain norms as well as mores and criminalization of certain deviant behaviours within a society. It is *Dharma* which makes the reconciliation,

arbitration and mediation of the diverse and conflicting claims of the various sections of the society possible.

However, positivists believe that it is state which has originated *Dharma*. The concept of *Dharma* is not divine. On the other hand, it has been created by the state and in case the concept existed earlier also but it was only the state which came up with its systematic exposition for its application to the real world.

IV. DANDA: MEANING AND NATURE

Dandaniti has been understood as the science of Hindu administration dealing with both the functions and machinery of government (Dikshitar, 1929). The legitimate use of brute force or violence is an important characteristic feature of any government agencies. The government agencies are supposed to wield the power of coercion for the purpose of enforcing the law and order. Without such power no government will be able to command the obedience of the people. The right to use force for the enforcement of the commands of the government is called as *Danda* in the Hindu political philosophy. It, therefore, becomes the Hindu equivalent of the western concept of state-sovereignty. The concept of *Danda* is regarded as the second most important idea of ancient India. Parmatma Sharan writes that this world is brought to righteousness through *Danda*, the rod of punishment. He elaborates further that it controls the four *varnas* so as to lead them onto the path of performance of their duties (as well as *Asrama Dharma*) and makes them desist from *Adharm*a (Sharan, 1983).

It is always expected of government to authoritatively allocate and reallocate the resources within a given society. This authority comes from the *Danda* wielding capacity of the government. *Danda*, therefore, is regarded as the primary condition for the emergence of the state/government (Bandyopadhaya, 1927, p. 283). B.K.Sarkar writes that a ruler (who is *Danda-dhara*, i.e., holder or bearer of Danda) in office personifies this *Danda*, but the ruler as a person is subject to it as every other individual is. He regards it as a moralizer, purifier and civilizing agent. The concept of *Danda* is in direct relationship with the concept of *Dharma*. *Dharma* is the end and *Danda* becomes the means for the realisation of this end. *Danda* is therefore supposed to be at the forefront of the political organization of any society.

Amartiya K. Sen (1926, pp. 3-4) writes that Kautilya even goes so far as to say that course of the progress of world depends on the science of *Dandaniti*. Quoting Shukra, he says that the king is the cause or maker of time . It thus becomes *Rajdharma* for the king to consolidate the position of his state through *Danda*. *Danda* or coercion is thus supposed to be the basic building blocks of the political society. What is it that makes the presence of *Danda* as the sine qua non for the existence of *Dharma* and thereby the human civilization? Why is it that the authority of the king is identified with restraint, a check, a control, a sanction and a command? It is the anti-social nature of the human beings. Manu says that, "rare is the man pure or sinless (*Doorlabho hi Schoochirnarah*)." B.K.Sarkar quoting Manu says that people are prone to interfere with the rights of others and violate morals and manners. According to Kamandaka, men are by nature subject to passions and covetous of one another's wealth and wives.

The non-existence of *Danda* and thereby *Dharma* is identified with *Matsya-Nyaya* translated in English as Logic of the Fish. *Matsya-Nyaya* is equivalent to the western notion of state of nature. It has been used as tool to explain the origin, nature and the legitimacy of the political authorities. Some political scientists regard this tool as only analytical while as some regard it as historical meaning thereby that there was a stage in world history which was characterised by *Matsya Nyaya*. The Ramayana also describes *Matsya Nyaya* as one in which "people ever devour one another like fish." In the *Matsya–Purana* it is written that, "the child, the old, the sick, the ascetic, the priest, the woman and the widow would be preyed upon according to the logic of the fish." Precisely, in the absence of the wielder of punishment, the powerful swallows the powerless.

As people got fed up with the state of affairs, state came into existence through divine intervention. For, when these creatures, being without a king, through fear dispersed in all directions, the Lord created a king for the protection of this whole creation (Buhler, 1964, pp. 216-218). A Kshatriya who has received according to the rule the sacrament prescribed by the Vedas must duly protect the whole world.

The Hindu political philosophy gave rise to an absolutist notion of sovereignty in the form of Danda. Because a king has been formed of particles of those lords of the gods, he, therefore, surpasses all created beings in lustre. Like the sun, he burns eyes and hearts, nor can anybody on earth even gaze at him (Buhler, 1964, pp. 216-218).

V.   KAUTILYA AND HIS ARTHASASTRA

A study of Kautilya's Arthasastra leaves no doubt in one's mind that the whole book was written from a positive and secular point. Witten between 321 and 320 B.C., it was discovered at Trivandrum in the Kerala state in the first decade of the twentieth century by Dr. R. Shamshastry, who later on became its first editor (Appadorai, 1992, p. 24). The book was divided into fifteen books with one hundred and fifty chapters. His book shows that Kautilya was a keen student of history. He advocated the teachings of political science with illustrations from ancient times (Appadorai, 1992, p. 24). The themes which he has covered in his literature are as (Kangle, 1963, pp. 20-30):

---

a) The bringing up and education of the young prince.
b) Appointment of ministers and the organization and functioning of various state departments,
c) Setting up of secret service.
d) Setting forth a code of civil and criminal law.
e) Regarding foreign relations, it puts before the ruler of the ideal of a *vijigisu* (would-be-world conqueror) and discusses in great detail the various situations he may have to face in his dealings with foreign states.

Kautilya's notion of state is organic in its nature as compared to the mechanic and the artificial nature of the western concept of state. Kautilya believes that state grows and develops in the same way as an individual grows and develops.

VI. THE CONCEPT OF STATE

Kautilya's state is based on the *septanga* theory of state. It means that as per his understanding state has seven organs without which the state is incomplete. Book six of *Arthasastra*, which is very short, enumerates the qualities which make each of the seven *prakritis* or constituents of the state ideal; it also describes the *Rájamandala* – a circle of kings as a preliminary to a discussion on the state's relations with its neighbours (Kangle 1963). The seven *Angas* (*prakritis*) that Kautilya recognizes are listed as under:

a) *Swamin* or King. It refers to the leadership component of the state. The decision making takes place at the level of political leadership.
b) *Amayta* or Ministers and Officials. *Amatyas* perform various functions which are mainly bureaucratic and judicial in their nature.
c) *Jana Pada* or Territory and Population. *Janapada* refers to natural resources and territorial components of the state.
d) *Durga* or Forts. Every state is supposed to have some basic national infrastructure.
e) *Kosha* or the Treasury. Kosha refers to the economic might of the state. It has a direct bearing on the national power of a state. If the state enjoys good economic resources, its national power will go up and if reverse is the case its power will go down.
f) *Danda* or the Army. *Danda* is identified with military forces. A well trained and well disciplined military force will always augur well for the state.
g) *Mitra* or Allies. This component refers to the alliances of the state with the other states. State is supposed to cultivate alliances with the other states and this aspect has been listed as one of the *Prakritis* of the state. For state to operate at the international level, the existence of alliances is treated as important.

There are three *Shaktis* or powers that operate in a state in the ascending order of importance (Adityakiran, 2015). *Utsahashakti*, *prabhushakti* and *Mantrashakti*. *Utsahashakti* is the personal energy, focus, grit and drive of state's leadership and its population. The second form of power is *Prabhushakti* which stands for the power of economy, enabling infrastructure and the military. Mantrashakti is the power of knowledge and intellect of the leadership, bureaucracy as well as the population. The tabular representation of these *Shaktis* is given as under:-

Table 1: Three Types of Powers in a State

Strength	Power
Knowledge, Intellect, Diplomacy, Culture	Intellectual Power (Mantrashakti) (Knowledge and Information Power)
Economic and Military Strength	Power of Material Resources (Prabhushakti) (Hard Power)
Courage, Focussed and Spirited Leadership and Population	Energetic and Spirited Power (Utsahashakti) (Preferential Power)

Source: (Adityakiran, 2015, p. 29)

VII. DOCTRINE OF MANDALA

By recognizing *Mitra* or allies as a vital *Anga* of the state's existence, Kautilya has shown how in ancient India international relations were paid due attention and were made the part and parcel of state's day to day activities. Hindu theory of international relations understands world politics in the idiom of *Mandalas*. A group of ten states constitutes one *Mandala*.

Every *Mandala* consists of the following types of states (Sarkar, 1919):

a) The *Vijigeesoo*: the aspirant, e.g., an Alexander "mewing his might," bent on "conquering and to conquer";
b) The *Ari* (the enemy): the one that is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the aspirant's territory;

c) The *Madhyama* (the mediatory): the one (located close to the aspirant and his enemy) capable of helping both the belligerents, whether united or disunited, or of resisting either of them individually ;

d) The *Udaseena* (the indifferent or the neutral): the one (situated beyond 1, 2, and 3) very powerful and capable of helping the aspirant, the enemy and the mediatory, together or individually, or resisting any of them individually.

The two diametrically opposite conceptions of the Hindu theory of state are given as under:

a) The doctrine of *Danda*, puts an end to *Matsya-Nyaya* among the praja or members of a single state;

b) The doctrine of *Mandala*, maintains an international *Matsya-Nyaya* at the world level.

This is one of the biggest dilemmas that the ancient Hindu tradition of political thought suffers from. For the emergence of State puts an end to the Matsya-Nyaya. Matsya-Nyaya is the ancient Hindu version of the English notion of state of nature. It is that condition of the human life when there was no state, no government and there were no laws. The order and security returns with the advent of state. But a new kind of Matsya-Nyaya gets recreated at the international level. Because there are multiple sovereign states and there is no hierarchy among them. For all these states are considered to be self-sufficient and equal. With the result every state is free in its interactions with every other state. The international politics, thus, re-launches us back into the same situation. Therefore the international politics becomes as per B.K.Sarkar a 'theatre of warfare' as every state is at loggerheads with every other state. The very idea of state that the ancient Hindu political thinkers conceived was unique. The ancient Hindu tradition of political thought characterizes a normal state as one which continuously works for the increase in its power and position vis a vis the other states. The key is to keep on increasing the economic resources and ensure all the means of self aggrandisement are utilized at the international level. To allow this to happen, states are supposed to cultivate alliances with the friendly states in order to corner and confront the enemy (*Ari*) states. The enemy states are to be confronted and so are their allies. The friend of an enemy is a potential enemy.

But even at the level of international relations, it is not as if there is no possibility of peace. The doctrine of *Sarvabhuma* as discussed by the ancient Hindu political thinkers creates a possibility for the world peace. Since the international politics in Hindu tradition of political thought comprises of various *Mandalas* which represent power struggles between *Vijighusoo* states and *Ari* states, there is a possibility that at the end of these struggles one single *Raj Mandala* will get created encompassing the whole world with a Vijigsoo state at the centre and an Ari state in the neighbourhood. When the either of these two overpowers the other, a single world ruler i.e., Sarvabhuma will usher into existence. It is this single ruler-ship of the world which will establish peace and order at the global level and put an end to the Matsya-Nyaya of the world politics.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Thus we come to the conclusion that entire Hindu tradition of political thought revolves around three main important ideas (Parekh, 1986). The first important idea is the nature and basis of *Dharma*. The second important idea is the nature and organization of *Danda*. The third important concept that they tried to focus their attention on was the relationship between these two concepts. The concept of *Dharma* is not identifiable with any religion. It is broader in its scope and needs to be accordingly dealt with. The analytical tools for *Dharma* have to be different from the analytical tools that we use for religion. *Dharma* indeed is more philosophical in its orientation.

The analysis of *Danda* gives the practical & secular character to the Hindu tradition of political thought. While dealing with the abstract philosophical concepts, the ancient Hindu tradition did not lose sight of the need of engaging with the practical and mundane issues of governance and power struggle. In fact, one of the important points that we should remember is that ancient Hindu political thinkers wrote directly for the attention of administrators and rulers.

The Hindu tradition of political thought approaches the concept of state from an organic point of view. They believed that state as an institution functions like a living being. It needs to grow and develop as all living beings do.

REFERENCES

[1] Adityakiran, G. (2015). Kautilya's Pioneering Exposition of Comprehensive National Power in the Arthashastra. In P.K. Gautam, S. Mishra & A. Gupta, (Eds.), *Indigenous Historical Knowledge: Kautilya and His Vocabulary* (Vol.1). Pentagon Press.

[2] Appadorai, A. (1992). *Indian Political Thinking Through the Ages*. Khama Publishers.

[3] Bandyopadhaya, N. C. (1927). *Development of Hindu Polity and Political Theories: Part 1, From the Earliest Times to the Growth of the Imperialistic Movement*. R. Cambray & Company.

[4] Buhler, G. (1964). The Laws of Manu in F. Max Mueller (Ed.), *The Sacred Books of the East*. Oxford University Press.

[5] Dikshitar, V.R.R. (1929). *Hindu Administrative Institutions*. (Ed.) S.K. Aiyangar, University of Madras.

[6] Gajrani, S., and Kumar, R. (2014). *Law in Ancient India*. Commonwealth Publishers, 18.

[7] Gier, N.F. Religiously Motivated Violence in Asia: India, Sri Lanka, Tibet and Japan. https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/orvproposal.htm

[8] Kāṇe, P.V. (1941). *History of Dharmasastra: (Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law in India, Vol. II)*. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

[9]   Kangle, R.P. (1963). *Kautilya and the Arthasastra*. University of Bombay.
[10]   Mehta, V.R. (1996). *Foundations of Indian Political Thought: An Interpretation – From Manu To The Present*. Manohar Books.
[11]   Pantham, T. (1986). Introduction: For the Study of Modern Indian Political Thought. In T. Pantham & K.L. Deutsch (Eds.), *Political Thought in Modern India* (pp. 9-16). Sage Publications.
[12]   Parekh, B. (1986). Some Reflections on the Hindu Tradition of Political Thought. In T. Pantham & K.L. Deutsch (Eds.), *Political Thought in Modern India* (pp. 17-31). Sage Publications.
[13]   Pūrva-Mīmāṁsā Sutra 1, 1, 2.
[14]   Sarkar, B.K. (1919). Hindu Theory of International Relations. *The American Political Science Review*, 13(3), 400-414.
[15]   Sarkar, B.K. (1921). The Hindu Theory of the State. *Political Science Quarterly, 36*(1), 79-90.
[16]   Sen, A.K. (1926). *Studies in Hindu Political Thought*. Chakravarti Chatterjee and Co.
[17]   Sharan, P. (1983). *Ancient Indian Political Thought and Institutions*. Meenakshi Prakashan.
[18]   The Valimikiya Ramayana, Aranya Kanda, Sarg 9 Verse 58.