



The Culture of Politics in Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

In Ancient India, the emergence of kings, the birth and development of various political institutions took place over a long period of time. From the time of the Harrapan and Vedic Civilization to the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, Indian political culture evolved into a fully developed and sophisticated monarchical system. Although there is no clear evidence of kings and political institutions in the Harrapan civilization, Historians have acknowledged the existence of a ruling class. Perhaps first mention of the word Raja in India is found in the Rig-Veda. But then he was the leader or group leader. That leader became even more powerful in the later Vedic period. Priestly rituals, animal sacrifices and the culture of deification of the Rajpad began during this period to make the Rajpad more acceptable and powerful to the masses; which is indicative of growth of ruling power and prestige. However, even though the ruling power and prestige increased, the monarchical state structure that evolved in to the later Vedic period did not emerge. Towards the end of the Vedic period and the 6th century BC, the idea of a territorial sate system began to gain strength. Sixteen mahajanapadas emerged during the period with the help of aggressive ruling groups and efficient armies. The development of taxation and administrative organization and the emergence of law and justice also took place during this period. The throne also became hereditary. As the Indian political system was established on a firmer foundation during the reign of the mighty dynasties like Mauryas, Kushans, Guptas, etc. the culture divinity was maintained in the same way.

Introduction

Ancient Indian's contribution to the origin and evolution of Indian political thought is undeniable. The emergence of kings in ancient India, the birth of various political institutions and the emergence of

political thought took place over a long period of time. From the time of the Harappan or Vedic civilization to the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, Indian political culture evolved into a fully developed and evolved monarchical system. The political thought and intellectual excellence of ancient India centered on Dharmashastra and Arthashastra was quite rich and admirable. Relying on the intellectual excellence, the kings of ancient India resorted to various methods or strategies as well as religion to establish their power in the kingdom; which over time became part of Indian political culture.

When talking about the early political culture of India, the Harappan civilization comes first. No such significant evidence of kings, political institutions, organizations or events has been found in the Harappan civilization. However, a type of elevated area called 'citadel' is known in cities. Historian Ranabir Chakravarti thinks that the buildings that are found there are not ordinary residences- "There were usually important buildings in high areas, which are associated with public life. These buildings are usually not ordinary dwellings".¹

Scholars disagree about the existence of a ruling class in the Harappan civilization. Harappan civilization's well-planned urban planning, health awareness, discipline do not seem to have been possible without a well-regulated governance system. Moreover, the discovery of fortified forts in each city attests to the presence of a powerful ruling class. Also, the way this civilization spread over a wide area beyond the Indus basin and its main characteristics were maintained almost the same everywhere was not possible without a competent administrative group. However, most of the historians have accepted that the priestly or religious group had a relationship with this administrative group.

In this context, the historian Shirin Ratnagar states that the Harappan states were ruled by a group of rulers and said – "Every ruler of the Bronze Age could be a priest king. This meant that they exercised their power from within the trappings of religious authority".² Again, historian Irfan Habib commented – "Religion necessarily helped to legitimize the power of the state in the minds of some of the subjects of Harappa".³

Thus, it can be inferred that from the period of the Harappan civilization a link between the priestly class or the religious group was established in the political culture of India. Historian Dilip Kumar Chakraborty says – "It is also true that the king was bound by social and religious ideals. Otherwise, somewhere or other there would be signs of special luxury in residence or something else. As a major source of ideals of social customs, religious ceremonies and political power - the priestly class must have been"⁴

For the political history of the later phase of the Harappan civilization we have to depend mainly on the Vedic literature. However, since Rikveda is primarily a religious literature, there are not many incidents related to political issues. The first mention and use of the word king in the history of India is probably found in the Rikveda. But did that king prevail as a powerful prestigious ruler like the king mature monarchical rule? Several historians have expressed their opinion in this regard.

Historian A.L. Basam says – “The Aryan tribes were ruled by the title of Raja. But the king did not possess any sovereign or absolute power as a ruler. The king was seen by the Aryas primarily as a war leader – whose primary duty was to protect his subordinate tribes from enemy attacks. In those early ages he was in no sense considered divine or possessed of divine powers, and no religious rites were due to him. But it was part of his duty to order animal sacrifices for the welfare of the tribe. And it was his job to look after the priestly class under whose authority those animal sacrifices took place.”⁵

According to historian Ranabir Chakravarti – “It is reasonable to judge the king of the Rikveda as the head of Jan, Gana, Bish. The signs of a monarchical system are absent in the Rikveda, its socio-economic elements and fields were not ready.”⁶ Historian Romila Thapar says– “In the early period Vedic kings were mainly military leaders. His kingship depended on his skill in battle and success in defending the tribe. He accepted freely given gifts. But he had no rights over land and received no regular taxes. He was entitled to a share of what was earned from war or cattle-grazing. His role in religious matters was minor, as the priests also had specific functions. But as the divinity was gradually imposed on the king, this situation changed.”⁷

That is, the king of the Rigvedic period was a military leader or clan chief. He possessed no sovereign power. He had no right over the land either. He did not receive any regular taxes. Even in this episode there is no attempt to impose divinity on the kingship or to treat the king as having divine power. Thus, in the Rigvedic period the king was seen mainly as a war leader. Whose main duty was to protect his clan members from enemy attacks.

This political situation of the Rigvedic period was gradually changing during the later Vedic period. In this phase the ruler's power was gradually increasing. Its evidence is found in later Vedic literature. There the words samrat or ekvat are used to denote a ruler more powerful than a king. During this period, kings began to resort to religious practices such as pilgrimages and sacrifices to assert their regal prestige. Aswamedha, Rajpeya, Rajsuya etc., costly complex and ritualistic Vedic rituals were performed under the supervision of priests to increase the power and prestige of the king. In all these

rituals, the ruler's adopted names are also indicative of his increasing power and prestige. Historian Ranabir Chakravarti's statement in this context is worth mentioning – “He eats the people of the Bish or race (Bishamatta); He is the Lord of Farmers (Charshaninam); Lord of the whole World and all creatures (Biswasyabhutasya Adhipati). In the Rigveda who was the lord of the Bish, in later Vedic literature he is the eater of the Bish; Indisputable evidence of the growth of the royal prestige is seen here.”⁸ However, due to the lack of system of collecting revenue through suppression with the help of the army, although the royal prestige of the king gradually increased, the full-fledged monarchical regime did not come in the later Vedic period. In the judgment of historian Ramsharan Sharma –

“This is the state of the eve of the complete state system; despite the anti-state political situation, the developed monarchy was still immature.”⁹

Although the later Vedic period did not emerge as a full-fledged monarchy, several clear differences are noticeable in the political culture of the Rigvedic period and the later Vedic period. Notable among which is the culture of deification. Where there is no evidence of deification of the king or any divine powers of the king in the Rigvedic period, there is a clear attempt to deify the king in the later Vedic period. In this context, historian Romila Thapar's statement is significant – “From the story of the later era, it is known that at that time, it was believed that the gods would choose the king to win the war. And the chosen king was regarded as possessing some eminent Bhagavadatta qualities. In this way heavenly attributes and signs were imposed on mortal man. Priests were the link between man and god. They prescribed special animal sacrifices to impose divinity on the kings. Along with the imposition of divinity on the kings, a special place and role was assigned to the priests. This is how the mutual dependence of the king and the priests began.”¹⁰ Again, historian D.N. Jha says – “During the coronation ceremony of the king, various deities were also invoked to bestow their own qualities on the king. Sometimes he was even presented as a god in that ceremony.”¹¹

Thus, the role and importance of the priestly class gradually increased in the later Vedic period, focusing on the imposition of divinity on the king, sacrifices and animal sacrifices. As a result of this, on the one hand, as the king's influence, prestige and ruling power began to affect the public, the link between the ruling community and the priestly community and religion was more firmly established in this phase. This stream of political culture of the Vedic period developed and matured in the later period and became an integral of the political culture of India.

In the post-Vedic period, the 6th century BC saw the introduction of township-based polities centered on specific territories. Sixteen Mahajanapadas emerged in India during this period. Janapada refers to a specific inhabited area under the rule of the royal power suitable for human habitation. So a township does not only mean a geographical area, it also has a political dimension. And Mahajanapada refers to a larger area or territory. Powerful vassals overwhelmed smaller and weaker vassals with efficient armies. And this efficient army was made possible by the improvement of various taxation and land revenue systems. Along with the improvement of the tax system, the administrative system also improved. It was during this period that various ministers or councils of advisers to assist the king in the administrative structure were first noticed. Notable among them are Basasakar of Magadha and Dirgha Charayan of Koshala. Law and Judiciary, an integral part of governance, also began during this period. In this way, the administrative structure was becoming increasingly sophisticated and complex. As the power and prestige of the state increased, the power of the king increased along with it. Rajpad also gradually became hereditary. The resulting monarchical state structure emerged in this phase.

In this period, a mature monarchical state structure emerged, but the culture of imposing divinity on the on the kingship remained the same as before. As before, ceremonies such as yajnas and sacrifices were organized with the focus of imposing divinity on the king. Aswamedha, Rajasuya, Rajapeya etc. would become a king with holy divine power and immeasurable power. As a result, the common people believed that the king was appointed by the gods and possessed great divine powers. He can even be considered as a god. As a result, through all these things, the king became more powerful and arrogant. And with all these yajnas and sacrifices, the priestly community was very much connected. That is why the priests were not considered as ordinary people. They were the bridge of communication between the king and the gods. In this way the king and the priestly community were able to unite and increase their power.

Along with monarchy, there is evidence of another form of government in ancient India called 'Ganarajya' or 'Republic'. Where the polity was run by a ruling class consisting of a few individuals. Because these republics were more liberal than monarchies, there was freedom of expression. Dissenting opinions were not ignored. Out of these republics emerged leaders of protestant religious movements such as Gautam Buddha and Mahabir. Those who went beyond the Brahminist meditation on the origin of the state held a different opinion. In this regard, the Buddhist story says that the king emerged from among the primitive people through social contract. According to historian Romila Thapar, this can be said to be the earliest account of social contract theory. Historian A.L. Basam says that the Buddhist

story about the origin of the king has some similarities with the Jain story. Thus, there is evidence of two ideas about the origin of the king or monarchy in ancient India. One of which was the Brahmanist concept, which says that the king emerged from the divine mystery. And the other was anti-Brahmanism. It states that the king emerged through the social contract.

However, even though the emergence of the king through social contract is mentioned in the Buddhist or Jain stories, this idea that the emergence of the king from the divine mystery was more active in the minds of the common people. The origin of the king is also supported by the story of the Arthashastra based on the treaty. But besides that, it is mentioned there to remind the people that the king is like *debota padabachya* or gods. Perhaps this is why Mauryan kings like Ashoka referred to themselves as 'Debanampiya' or beloved of the gods.

Maurya kings did not organize any Vedic ceremonies such as yajnas and animal sacrifices, focusing on the imposition of divinity on kingship to demonstrate political power. They didn't even have a grand title like their predecessors. However, among the Maurya kings, Emperor Ashoka introduced a somewhat exceptional and strategic approach in this regard. He resorted to a very different approach to his preached Dhammaniti to make Rajpad popular with the masses. Historian Ranabir Chakravarti's statement in this regard is pertinent – "Through the principles of Dhamma, Ashoka was admonishing the subjects to practice complete obedience to the king, along with other conduct. A ruler inspired by Dhammaniti will assume a paternal role. It is also the moral duty of the subjects to show firm loyalty to the king."¹²

In the post-Maurya period, Kushan and other kings used to adopt grandiose titles like Maharaja, Rajatiraj etc. to increase their royal power and influence. Apart from that, he used to organize elaborate yajnas like Aswamedha, Rajasuya etc. The tendency to deify the king became more pronounced during this period. It is said in several scriptures of this period that the king originated from the gathering of the essence of various gods. So he cannot be insulted. He is also described as venerable. The Kushan kings also referred to themselves as direct sons of God. Attempts to seat the king and deity in the same seat are also noticeable in various Kushan inscriptions and coins. Even the Kushan kings established Debakul in an attempt to portray themselves as gods and even set up their idols there. Through this they wanted to take the king to the level of an adorable god. The political culture of elevating a king to the status of a god by establishing such a Debakul is probably not seen in any other dynasty in the history of India.

In the post-Kushan political culture of the Gupta period, the practice of taking various grandiose titles continued. Titles like Parambhatarak, Rajadhiraj, Prithibipati etc. are undoubtedly indicative of the great prestige and power of the Gupta kings. Many of the Gupta emperors also organized Aswamedha yajna to maintain political supremacy. Like the earlier dynasties, they also maintained the culture of deification of the king. They regularly presented to the public that the king was the representative of God or equal to the Gods. Evidence of this is also found in Gupta coins of that time.

The cultural trend of imposing divinity in ancient Indian politics started from the time of Harappan or Vedic civilization and was continued during the Gupta period. This culture of imposing divinity on the rulers was able to establish the political system on a more mature and solid basis. The king became the representative of God and more powerful. As a result, people began to think of him as God's representative rather than as an ordinary person, who is worshiped and whose orders must be obeyed

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