

**ARISTOTLE AND KAUTILYA ON THE CONCEPT OF GOOD
GOVERNANCE AND WELFARE STATE**

SAMAR KUMAR MONDAL

Why does philosopher say regarding any matter is more important than what he had said in this regard. That is why, 'why' question is more significant than 'what' question in Philosophy. If we want to enquire about anything, we have to search about its social, political and economical context. If we don't understand the context, we are unable to give the right answer to this question. History reminds us the fact that the concept of state has started near about 2300 years ago in the West. Many

thinkers agreed with the view that the Western concept of state has started long back, may be from the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but question may be raised: why did the West investigate the idea of a state? To respond, we can say that any positive thinking usually starts from a crisis and positive thinkers always try to overcome from the crisis positively. They try to derive a particular conclusion to solve the crisis. Thus, we can say that there may be a crisis to some extent in the time of Plato and Aristotle.

What do we understand by 'crises'? If we look into the history of the Greeks, we can find that there were countries like, Athens, Sparta etc. and they often involve in war. In some cases, the war continued for fifty years, and in some cases more, as for example, the war among the Empire of Persia and Greek city-states in 500 - 479 BC which is known as Greco-Persian War. Greek invited Athens and Sparta for conducting the war and consequently, Persia was defeated and Athens won more states. The war between Athens and Sparta in 431 BC which is known as Peloponnesian War, Persia had an alliance with Sparta. After this war, the whole Greek society has gone into mismanagement, where people involved in fight, envy, and grudge. Thus, there was a crisis of a healthy environment. That is why, thinkers like, Plato, Aristotle tried to overcome the crisis in the form of their works *Republic* and *Politics*.

If we look into Indian civilization and culture, we will see the same situation like the Greeks. The concept of state was formulated in India much before Kautilya. It is a fact that there was no concrete form of state, but the analysis of state was started with Kautilya. There were disputes in provincial rule as well as invasions by kings like great Alexander for which it was necessary to protect the country and make it free from the tyrannical attitude of provincial rulers. Many rulers of the small states in north-western part of Indian continent have learned how to chase foreign attacks which was made possible for Kautilya. The intention was how to release all Indians from the foreign kingship and how to establish a superior rule, for which we can say that there was a crisis behind this and to overcome this crisis Kautilya had written *Arthaśāstra*. If there were no crisis, *Arthaśāstra* would not have been. It is hard to believe that the discussion about modern state starts only from Plato and Aristotle.

But there are many discussions about agriculture, economics, politics, foreign policy, the principle of war, modern law system, the social status of women etc. in *Arthaśāstra*.

Origin of the state and its aim

According to Aristotle, everything in the world is made out of the law of causation and every object has two parts or aspects, one is potential and the other is actual. He holds that in the state of potentiality is called matter and when it is actuated from the potential state it is called form. He also says that each and every object in the world has a definite aim. So without the aim nothing will be created in this world. In this way there is a particular aim for developing the state and that is, the welfare of the state. According to him family is the primal matter of the construction of a state or polis. That is why, we can say that there is a certain aim of a family and that is to fulfill the need of every member of a family.

One may ask that, is it necessary to form a state in human life? Aristotle holds that it is necessary, because human wants to leave in a family as she/he can fulfill his/her need and the ultimate aim of a family is to achieve a happy life. He also holds that a happy life depends upon three things; the quality of philosophic sense, moral quality and moderate wealth. A happy life can be maintained if she/he lives in a state. That is why he says; who is not associated in *polis* is either beast or a God.¹ The Āryans were involved with in-fighting against people for their secure place where they can leave without hazard and disruption. Those who possesses highest power of the intellect they are the winners. Mythologically it is observed that the origin of a state or king is raised from the battle between Gods and demons. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* has described that the battle was started between God and demons and demons were the winners. Consequently, they start to ponder over the reasons for their defeat and found that they did not have a king for leading the battle. Thus, they feel that they need a king and from this reason they decided to elect someone who will be treated as king. According to *Aitareya-Brahmaṇa*...“The *Devas* said, it is on account of our having no king, that the *Asuras* defeated us. Let us elect a

¹ Ernest Barker, *Aristotle Politics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 11

king. All consented. They elect *Soma* as their king. Headed by king *Soma*, they were victorious in all directions. He who brings the sacrifice is the king *Soma*.”²

Manusamhitā explains that absence of a king ends with in-fighting and the oppressed is protected by a king only. In *Mahābhārata*, Yudhishthira asked Bhishma that how a king or state formed. Bhishma responded that if there is no king, no kingdom, and no punishment, there is no justice. They protect themselves by a particular order. They all believe in this order which is called *Satya-yuga*. We can compare this concept with Rousseau who says, those people are good who did not face any kind of civilization. The meaning of civilization is an extreme portion of deception or disloyalty according to him. There is no selfishness in a natural kingdom. But when humans are able to plunder the property of others’, they are involved with in-fighting. Some people are involved in acquiring the wealth more and more, for which all orders are converted into disorder.

From the very beginning of civilization, there were no kings, no punishment but, for the creation of disorder, a person wants to rule the civilization, though he is not considered as a king. He is the ruler of the weak where physical strength is considered as the only source of power. This is called *Mātsyanyāya* in the *Arthasāstra* of Kautilya. “When people were oppressed by the law of the fishes (*Mātsyanyāya*, according to which the giant fish swallow the smaller), they made Manu, the son of Vivasvat, the king.”³ That is, the person who is the physically powerful can do anything against the weak if not punished. Thus, there is every possibility to acquire the property of the weak by the stronger.

For Vishma, the sole duty of a king is to establish *dharma* (moral order) and *artha* (money). The king’s money is spent by the king only and the moral order is established with the help of his principle of punishment (*Dandaniti*). Aristotle holds that man are basically selfish, and it is natural that man tries to seek his own interest. But if his self-interest is more, it will be treated as selfishness. We can explain it in the framework of Indian ethics where it is said that, liberation is our ultimate

²Martin Haug, *Aitareya Brahmaṇa of the Rigveda*, vol.II, Govt. Central Book Depot, Bombay, 1863, p.33-34

³ R.P. Kangle, *The Kautilya Arthasāstra*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, 2000, Vol-II, p.116.

puruṣārtha. But *dharma* is the necessary tool for the attainment of it. *Artha* is necessary for the accomplishment of *dharma* and there is no inconsistency for acquiring money according to the need. But if we acquire more money apart from our need, it is called *artha-duṣaṇa*, which is condemnable. Our *Ṛṣis* have given ethical directions for the protection of people from *artha-duṣaṇa*. Aristotle also said that the exchange or lending system is natural, but exchange or lending of currency is against of human nature. That is why *artha* is treated as weird property. He does not support rate of interest in lending money. Though he holds the view that, there is a sure necessity of moral education for the protection of human beings from selfishness which is the duty of a lawgiver of a state.⁴ They ought to create social feelings among the citizens and this feeling is implicitly contained in a king.

Who is a ruler and who is ruled?

We all agree with the view that the world is always moving or changing with some objectives. So in the origin of the state, there must be some aims and objectives i.e. the welfare of the state. In Aristotle's *Politics* there were many elements in formation of a state. Family is the primal element for the formation of a family and a family is constituted by the combination of males, females. According to Kautilya, there are six essential elements of a state. These are 'svāmin, the ruler, amātya, the minister, janapada, the territory with people settled on it, durga, the fortified capital, kosa, the treasury, daṇḍa, the army and mitra, the ally. The ally is the ruler of a different organized state and forms no part of the other state's internal organization."²⁶ But in *Politics*, family is the primal element of state and state is an extension of the family. According to Aristotle, there are basically three relations among them. The first one is the relation between master and slave, the next one is, and the relation between husband and wife and the third one is the relation between father and son. One may ask: who will be the ruler? And who is ruled? Aristotle says the ruler and the ruled must be decided by nature. He holds that master is the ruler. Husbands rules the wives and fathers rules the sons is not only scientific but also logical. Because there are some specific qualities for being a master and that is why, they constitute a family. The emotional factor must be ruled by reason which is not

⁴ Ernest Barker, *Aristotle Politics* New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, p.48
 5.R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, 2000, Vol-II, p.127

only beneficial but also necessary.²⁷ For example, body is ruled by mind. The tame animal is better than the wild, and the reverse is fatal.

We can find some similarities between Greek and Indian civilization in the formation of a state. In Vedic period, there was an important role of a ruler like the head of a household. Village was the smallest unit in Vedic society and *Jana* was the highest unit and its ruler was called a king. *Rigveda* reveals that the name of *Bhārata* originated from the king *Bharata*. He was called the ruler of a particular area. A small household was called as *kula* (root). The head of a household has an important role in ruling a village and the use of the term “*kulapa*” and “*Brajapati*” in *Ṛigveda* which is called “*grāmakuta*” in *Arthaśāstra* justifies this position. There was also a reference to the term “*grāmasvāmin*” which means the owner of the village.⁷

In *Politics*, the ruler is determined by nature. There was no debate between Kautilya and Aristotle regarding the above proposition as Aristotle says that a person who is superior in intellect or reason is treated as the ruler. On the other hand, a person who is superior in physical strength but lack of proper knowledge or reason is ruled. The ruler must have some extraordinary qualities. Kautilya supports the hereditary rule, though he often says if the king can establish himself as a good ruler and his son is completely acquired his father’s qualities then he may be considered as a ruler. For Kautilya, “a ruler is born with some rare and extraordinary qualities. Training (*vinaya*) of the ruler is, therefore regarded as essential. The most important aspect of training is the study of *Anvikṣiki* or the philosophical disciplines, *trayi* or the Vedic lore.”⁸

There are a number of conditions in acquiring property for next generation. If the ruler’s son is blind, deaf or dumb then he is not able to acquire the property of king thus no right to acquire. There are examples in *Mahābhārata*, where Dhritarastra was not allowed to be the king as he was blind. According to Kautilya, the ideal ruler is a person who is always engaged in the welfare of his progeny and tries to engage them in moral perspective. We have seen the same tone in Aristotle’s writings. He holds that there must be a heartiest (friendship) relationship among the master and

⁶Ernest Barker, *Aristotle Politics* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.15

⁷ R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2000, Vol-II, p. 197

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 129

slave.⁹ The master may engage his slave for his own purpose and the slave can achieve those qualities by obeying their masters.

Ownership

Another similarity between Kautilya and Aristotle regarding the ownership of property may be mentioned here. According to Aristotle, the ownership of property is beneficial if it is in private, instead of common ownership. He says any one can be a beneficiary in common though ownership is in private. Other people can use a property if it necessitates. It is necessary for the transfer or donation to other people, because there is no scope to donate or transfer a property to any person if the ownership is in common.

In *Vedic* scriptures, there were many discussions on the ownership of lands. The king has no right to acquire a land from any one if he cares or nurtures land for many years even though the king is the owner of kingdom. According to the *Arthaśāstra*, “a question that has exercised the minds of scholars for long is whether all land belongs to the state or there is private ownership in land. Opinions are diverse on this issue. So far as *Arthaśāstra* is concerned, there is little doubt that it recognizes private ownership of land, although it presupposes the existence of state-owned or crown lands. According to *Arthaśāstra*, all unoccupied lands belong to the state.”¹⁰ The king can not impose any kind of tax on these lands. There was no option for imposing tax on people but there is a direction in scriptures that how much tax is imposed. It is also said that in case of emergency, war and drought, a king can impose more tax burden on the citizens by requesting the people for the safety and security of the state. But there is no possibility of imposing tax burden on the non-fertile land. If there is no agreement within the citizens, the king can not impose tax on the landowners. *Arthaśāstra* gives us a proof that ownership must be in private which is similar to Aristotle’s view. For Kautilya, people own private property but the king is the owner of that property in a moral sense. So, Kautilya’s thought is very much clear regarding the ownership of property and his ideas in this regard seems stronger than the Greek.

Sovereignty:

⁹ Ernest Barker, *Aristotle Politics* New York: Oxford University. Press, 1998, p.19

¹⁰ R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2000, Vol-II, p. 169

One may ask: who is sovereign? There was a debate between Kautilya and Aristotle on this issue and Aristotle proposes in his *Politics* that there were several possibilities for being a sovereign. Who are the sovereign people? Are the rich, the middle class and the tyrant sovereign? According to Aristotle, these alternatives appear to involve unpleasant result. If the poor are sovereign as they are the majority in a state, proceed in possession of the wealth of the rich. And if the rich are sovereign who is less in majority but rich in wealth, plunder the wealth of the poor. Again, if the middle class are the sovereign then the other people are not being treated as a part of the constitution. There is a possibility of risk of corruption and illegal activity if majority of the people are sovereign as majority of the people are poor. That is why, some thinkers are of the opinion that no person is treated as sovereign and only law is sovereign, though ruling system may differ. Law may be good to some and may be bad for some others. So, we have to be more careful in abiding constitution of the state. For the prevention of corruption, Kautilya says, "Secter agents are careful for detecting corruption among state servants. It is recognized that despite of all due care exercised in the appointment of officers, cases of embezzlement of state funds often occur. In a few remarkable verses, it is pointed out that it is impossible for an officer who take cares of state funds or goods to resist the temptation to misappropriate and it is as difficult as to detect an officer while he is misappropriating funds just like to detect a fish while it is drinking water. To detect the officers involved in misappropriation of funds are more difficult to predict just like to detect the movement of birds in the sky." ¹¹

Question remains, how many ruling system exist in a state? There are three types of ruling system in Aristotle's framework. The first one is kingship rule of government where only one person is the sovereign though the aim of this system is the welfare of the all. The second one is aristocracy rule of government, where only rich are sovereign. And the third one is the constitutional government where most of the people are sovereign. But these three systems have their perverted forms. The first one kingship government may be perverted into the tyrannical government and turns into a single person's interest. The second one is an oligarchy system where the

¹¹ R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2000, Vol-II, p. 207.

government runs for the interest of rich. The constitutional government may be perverted into a democratic system where the poor are the sovereign and runs for the interest of poor. But no government is able to fulfill the actual aim of the states, as the aim of a state is to provide welfare to all but this motto cannot serve all these possibility.

Which government is better?

Aristotle emphasizes upon sovereignty on democratic rule instead of others. He holds that in this system a citizen may not possess good qualities but when they all come together there is a possibility of surplus quality. There is a risk in this kind of ruling as occupying the highest position in offices may lead to injustice and wrongdoing. Plato proposes to construct a board after the retirement of a Magistrate. According to him, the state is to be founded upon reason,¹² and laws must be rational and rational laws can only be made by rational men i.e. the philosophers. The rulers must be the Philosophers. *Republic* is an ideal of a perfect state, the dream of a kingdom of God on earth. While explaining the nature of justice in *Republic* Plato opines that a society is just only when each of these three types of human character performs. An unjustified interference of a particular class of people with the others causes political injustice.

Plato formed the ideal state in *Republic*, but the point is that actual democracy may not be possible only by rules and regulations. That is why Plato raises the question in the *Statesman*¹³, who conducts the Government? The answer is a government is run by one, some or many people. Plato did not believe that government is conducted by many. Because a lawful government is best when a government is run by one, the worst when conducted by many. Aristotle is not in a position to accept Plato's view. According to him, the sovereignty of a state should be by the people at large though there is a possibility of injustice, wrongdoing, thoughtlessness and error. "That is why Solon and some of the other legislatures,

¹² Frank Thilly, *A History of Philosophy*, SBW Publishers, New Delhi, 1993, p.73.

¹³ J.B. Skemp, *Plato's Statesman*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961, p.117

allow people to elect officials in the government and to make them accountable at the end of their tenure, but not to hold office by their individual capacity”.¹⁴

Question may be raised: which is more important in a state? Is it ruled by one, by the best man or by the best laws? Some thinkers who support the kingship government opines that law can only lay down general rules, as law is not imposing different commands to deal with different situations. They also think that there is no element of passion in law which is innate in every citizen. According to Aristotle, “in those matters on which law is unable to perform, owing to the difficult of framing general rules for all contingencies, to make an exact pronouncement.”¹⁵ If law is unable to solve a problem, this power retains not only for one but also for the common, because a state is constituted by common people, so it can be assured that people’s view or mandate is superior to a particular person’s rule. It is less probable that the citizens may involve with corruptions. For this reason, Aristotle says that there are three perverted forms of constitutions, like tyranny, oligarchy and democracy from kingship, Aristocracy and constitutional government. Aristotle’s opines: “These three perverted forms may be graded in an ascending order - tyranny the worst; oligarchy the next worst, and democracy the least.”¹⁶ He also opines that there are several forms of democracy rather than a single form and the same law cannot possibly be beneficial to all forms of democracy.

¹⁴ Ernest Barker, *Aristotle Politics* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.109

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.112

¹⁶ Ernest Barker, *Aristotle Politics* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998,p.135