

Idealising Politics: Cross-questioning the Conventional Account

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Abstract

In this paper I intend to map out an alternative way of doing politics as the current form of politics and political activities of many countries could not keep up with the expectations of their people. There is also a general perception that moral degeneration is exceptionally high in this arena, and hence, purging political activities is a need of the hour. The moot question is how we can have these tidying-up activities done. To my mind, blending ethics with politics is one way of doing this. I depicted this point, and while doing this, I analysed the power dynamics, using various prominent scholars' views in this area. After that, I wanted to show that an alternative way of politicking was not merely fiction in the imagination. It indeed can be put into practice. Finally, I raised a question that has been troubling my mind for quite a long time. In ethics, there are various lines of thinking. Do these multiple lines involve any manoeuvring, which is questionable in itself?

Keywords: *ethics, politics, fiction, depiction*

Paper

In contemporary times, it is commonly held that politics is a dirty job, and it has earned a negative fame. It has acquired this disreputation for various factors. We cannot think of a society outside the state; hence, politics is an essential requirement for every society. Politicians or professionals engaged in politics are usually expected by people in general to follow strict ethical guidelines. This conventional expectation of ordinary people has been belied as politicians take recourse to many unscrupulous means to grab or retain power, which is contrary to many normative principles expected from ordinary men. Nowadays, politics and ethics, when used together, are considered oxymoronic. Max Weber, a nineteenth-century German sociologist, raises a pertinent question: can a political person be good in the commonly-held sense of the good? Some thinkers doubt it on the ground that the state is actually established by employing force. Hence, normative norms applicable to the commoner are not fit for politics or actors of politics. This view finds echo in the writings of many other thinkers. One such thinker is Reinhold Niebuhr, who depicts the mismatched character of individuals and social groups in his widely praised book *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and*

*Politics*¹. He holds that an individual is capable of ranking the interests of others over her/his own, which is indeed hard for a social group. This variance demands a different ethical code for social groups or, say, for a state. Thus emerged the notion of state morality. However, our intention is not to analyse and discuss the nature of such morality. What I intend to do at the present venture is to show that many thinkers in the oriental world, as well as in the occidental world, firmly held that politics can be practised differently or, to say, in a spirit that is rarely found in many parts of the globe. They did not find any necessity to practice the political profession in the ways for which it has earned nicknames like 'Dirty Hands', etc., where using ruthless means is practised more often than not or where fair is foul and foul is fair. Instead, these thinkers were convinced that we can elevate politics to a higher level and that it is subservient to some higher purpose. Thus, I aim to delineate a narrative that goes against common perception and demonstrate that it is possible. If politics can be spiritualised, its ennobling character will come forth.

II

The history of the emergence of the entity called 'state' is veiled in mystery. It might be by force, as Leon Trotsky has asserted, or social contract, as many others have posited, to get rid of undesirable situations. We find a number of speculations about its emergence in India as well as in the West. For whatever reason and in whatever way it came into being, there is no gainsaying the fact that it is a significant entity. Prof. R. Sundar Rajan, a prominent Indian philosopher, succinctly describes why we give primacy to politics or political entity (state): "its role is seen in terms of securing the fulfilment of man's complex interests."²In order to coordinate these complex interests, a state develops complex instruments and, therefore, is vested with a lot of power. The moot question is how to use this power by such an empowered group of people, as it is the only legitimate entity to use force. Righteous use of power can create a situation where this 'complex interest' of different groups or individuals is coalesced and can create a situation imagined

¹Niebuhr, Reinhold (1932). *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

²Rajan, R. Sundar (2001). *The Primacy of the Political*. Indian Council of Philosophical Research, p. 1.

to prevail in the abode of God. On the other hand, its wrong use can spell doom. Hence, a burning question is how to use this power or, rather, how can we ensure that wielders of power use it righteously? Since ancient times, we find this question has captivated the attention of political philosophers.

In India, ancient *śāstrakāras* could foresee the problem regarding the use of power. Hence, they clearly stated the aim of politics or a state and its (power's) application modalities. Beginning from *Arthśāstra*, *Nītiśāstras*, *Smṛitiśāstras*, and epics everywhere we find these two concerns. There, we find an appeal for spiritualising politics, and they also delineate its necessity. Such an imploration is found in the West in the writings of some prominent writers and diplomats, which I intend to explore and analyse in the present venture.

As it was the monarchical system that prevailed during ancient India, most concerns centre around the application of power by the monarch. By and large, we can say that it was held that *prjāsukha* (i.e., the well-being of its citizens) was the centre point of attention. What is today known as welfarism, almost the same idea was expressed by the term '*prjāsukha*'. In the *Arthśāstra* Kaūṭilya asserts, "*PrjāsukhesukhamRaghah, prajanamtuhitehitam.*" This Indian parlance (i.e., *prjāsukha*) has attracted the attention of many writers, even at contemporary time in the West though couched in different phraseologies.

Interestingly, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, calls politics the 'master science' or art. He further asserts that the end of which we are after is the 'good'. Out of many goods, there must be a prime or chief good. The science that deals with this chief good will be the master science, and he identified politics as the master science. The reason he states for this is that politics "legislate what we are to do and what we are to abstain from. The end of this science must include the ends of the others so that this end must be the good for men."³

Despite the importance accorded to the standard of politics in India and Greece with time, we find it receding to the background and social enquiry about growth and development came to the foreground. Sundar Rajan attributes this to the acceptance of the modernisation model, which is mainly apolitical in nature. By

³ Cited in *The Primacy of the Political*, p. 2.

and large social scientists went by the view that if socio-economic improvement was accomplished, political development would follow suit.

The above changes brought many modifications in our behaviour and attitude. With this political behaviour of rulers has undergone a sea change. It is thought that moral degeneration in their behaviour also became palpable. Hence, scholars began to think about how this degeneration can be arrested and what is the relation between ethics and politics. Because of their deliberations, much literature kept mushrooming over the years.

III

We frequently hear our political masters averring that everything is possible in politics. In saying this, they seem to think that there is no necessity to limit the possibilities in politics by imposing or infusing normative norms in the political arena. If we can show that this is not actually the case and that political practices have moral underpinnings, the views of many of our political masters can be falsified. The apparent flouting of ethical norms was not absent even in the past. On account of this, one state captured another state or its territory, took recourse to genocide, and many other unethical practices. Lord Acton, a noted British historian and politician of the 19th century, in a letter written to Bishop Mandell Creighton, calls attention to the misuse of power by popes and inquiries into the reason for this abuse. He held that "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely". It can be presumed that Acton intended to convey that the conferment of more power diminishes a person's sense of morality. Hence, vesting more power, particularly in politics, is fraught with danger.

Not only Acton but many other thinkers warned of the riskiness of aggregation of power. For example, Henry David Thoreau's view "that government is best which govern the least" given in his "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) succinctly summarises the danger of concentration of power. Behind the concentration of power in governments indeed lurk hazards. Perhaps it is for this reason that Jinsena, a Jain writer, considered the state the cause of affliction and a necessary evil. The existence of such elaborate machinery is indeed a necessity. Hence, some writers contended that the state/government is a necessary evil.

History is replete with thunderous fighting between covetous politicians to load them with more and more power and people trying to limit them to ensure individuals' domains either expand or remain intact.

We have seen the reason for the importance given to politics. We have also seen that the existence of a state has a defined goal. It is the *lokahita*. In the *Rāmāyana*, when Jabali was trying to convince Ramchandra not to go into exile but rather stay back in his kingdom, thus disobeying his father's wish, Jabali's main argument was that it would bring well-being (*lokahita*) to his subjects. By saying this, he tried to convey the message that the goal of a king is well-defined. Somedeva Suri, a celebrated Jain saint, holds that the state's aim is to facilitate the realisation of liberation for its citizens. In contemporary times, Sri Aurobindo tells us that the state has a spiritual goal. Thus, we find that politics in India has a distinct aim. It is to fulfil basic human needs. Now, the question arises of what constitutes this basic human need. Indian seers formulated the answer to this question in terms of *puruṣārtha*. Usually, it is said that *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa* are basic human needs. In order to fulfil these needs, we need a congenial milieu. The state makes this ambience. Recent incidents in some neighbouring countries of ours made it amply evident that political bungling creates a situation that is not helpful for its citizens for pursuing goals of their choice. A state is an appropriate agency that can create an atmosphere where people can pursue their aims. We find Somdeva Suri began his *Nītivākyamitram* by saluting the state. Immanuel Kant in the West dedicated his *magnum opus* to the then-education minister of Germany (Baron Von Zedlitz). Had he not been the education minister and a great patron of learning, it could have been difficult for the German philosopher to bring out his masterpiece. Therefore, creating an ambience where people can pursue their aim and progress towards self-realisation preoccupied the attention of thinkers. They thought that a critical measure for this was to make the ruler follow ethical codes strictly. However, observing ethical norms in political practice is an intricate task. Hence, philosophers became concerned with delineating the relationship between ethics and politics.

Right from Plato's time, thinkers were concerned about the relationship between ethics and politics in the West. Plato's conceived state and his philosopher

king can ensure that politics is not practised without ethics or, to say it more precisely, he will give ethical leadership. In recent times, for some reason or other thinkers again expressed their concerns as politicians are trying to prove that politics has no relation to ethics. Machiavelli is considered the first modern political thinker of the 16th century who clearly enunciated that there is, and should be, no place for ethics in politics. Even modern philosophers like Hans J. Morgenthau drew a sharp line between individual morality and state morality and suggested that the states should always be guided by state morality for the sake of enhancing national power. Francis Fukuyama, known for his view of the 'end of history' in the recent past, expressed his concern about this. Karl Popper voiced concern on this issue in his *The Open Society and its Enemies* and some of his recent lectures. Pitirim A. Sorokin, a Harvard sociologist, also expressed concerns about the unprecedented strife that the world was encountering. To overcome that, he suggested many ways to harness love energy to give ethical leadership. Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary General of the UNO from 1955-61, in his *Markings* reaffirmed this line of thinking.

IV

An important question is: why do we think that politics should have moral underpinnings? A plausible response may be that men in politics possess much power. This power can be used in various ways. The proper use of it goes a long way to fulfil the aspirations of its people. Someone can misuse his enormous power. This misuse has broader implications as it can bring catastrophe for the state and its people. Many eminent personalities, like Gautam Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, were also very powerful. Their approach to power was positive, and they used this power for a charitable purpose. Their use of power was noble and intended to transform and propel the world to a newer height. But rulers are prone to misuse their power when they become mighty. The moot question is why this proneness is so widespread and unbridled. Former Indian President, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, once held that thrust for personal comforts

and greed for opulence drive people of power corridor for self-indulgence, which in turn propel them to unscrupulous practices.⁴

This brings us to a discussion on power dynamics, an indeed vast area. Without entering into detail, we can have a short overview of different types of power. In analysing the nature of power, in his *Three Faces of Power*, Kenneth E. Boulding, an English-born American philosopher, holds that power is the means to have something done according to someone's wishes.⁵ However, this can be achieved in various ways. Boulding talks about three types of power: i) threat power, ii) economic power, and iii) integrative power. The first one is a belligerent and ruinous power. Military exercise is a typical example of threat power. Economic power is a positive as well as constructive power as it generates something. Integrative power about which we are less aware contrives relationships and, in doing so, brings people in contact with each other. Boulding shows that all these types of power can be used perniciously as well as sensitively to produce more excellent goods. A state or government gets the thing done, as it wants, mainly using threat power—a threat either through punitive action or reward giving. Having distinguished three contours of power, Boulding puts a premium on integrative power. Though he does not give a definition of this type of power, he says that it is the power which forges relationships such as love, regard, legitimacy, and kindness. He tells us that the “threat power is ...the concern of political scientist...”⁶ Economic power is the concern of economists. But what is intriguing about this trifurcation is that integrative power, a very dominant power, is not a concern of any specific branch of knowledge. This integrative power is the most notable form of power. He cites instances of personages like Goutam Buddha and Jesus, who epitomised integrative power. Love, respect, etc., are different strands of integrative power. Despite not having a threat or economic power, these luminaries could influence a considerable number of people.

⁴ Kalam, APJ Abdul (2013). *Squaring the Circle: Seven Steps to Indian Renaissance*. Universities Press, p. 13.

⁵ Boulding, E. K. (1989). *Three Faces of Power*. Sage Publication, Newbury Park: London, p. 9.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.

Another prominent personality whose analysis of power and bringing to the surface its relationship with morality drew the attention of many is P. A. Sorokin. Sorokin, in his famous book *Power and Morality: Who Shall Guard the Guardians?* has made an empirical study of many rulers' moral behaviour and showed how the 'sensate society's (for Sorokin, the contemporary Western society which is extremely materialistic and considers only sensory material world as true reality is sensate society) extreme dependence on empirical domain leading to unethical use of power in different realms of life. In order to put an arrest on such a state of affairs, he calls for more reliance on the super-sensory domain. As he says, 'true supersensory—superrational intuition or divine inspiration' can go a long way in curing many problems in a sensate society. Knowledge derived from supra-sensory or supra-rational intuition can work as an antidote to extreme dependence on sensate culture and help in the righteous use of power. Empirical knowledge has phenomenally increased our scientific understanding. But that did not considerably reduce evil acts. Instead, it has served to increase the problem.

Hence, the sociologist-turned-philosopher asserts that there is no necessary connection between scientific education and morality, which sounds almost like Plato's view. Finding the missing link between the two, he attempted to propound a different type of theory called 'integral theory.' This, he wants, should replace the 'sensate theory'. He admits that in developing the integral theory he reaped ideas from different sacred beliefs. For Sorokin, the reality is multi-dimensional. Hence, our reliance on reality's sensory aspect will not help us comprehend it fully. He talks about three dimensions of reality— 'empirical sensory, rational-mindful and supra-sensory-supra-rational' elements of reality. These are not mere fictions of imagination; human beings can obtain knowledge of them. If we take the scientific, philosophical and religious aspects of reality into account, we can get a complete picture of reality. Some truths, such as ethical norms, aesthetics and spiritual truths, cannot be reduced to empirical truth and, therefore, cannot be known through sense perception. On the other hand, they cannot be ignored as they are also integral parts of reality. In order to comprehend it, we need to employ all the sources of knowledge that human beings are capable of. These means are senses, reason and faith/intuition. Turning a deaf ear to either one and exaggerating anyone will give

us only an imperfect picture of reality. Hence, Sorokin says that developing an "adequate integral system of cognition" is imperative. He points out that our tendency to disregard supra-sensory aspects and consider empirical and rational aspects as the only aspects are causing us dearly. Taking clues from the Hindu notion of *prajñā*, Buddhist and other traditions, he tries to substantiate his claim. He holds that cultivation of "such a genuine integral system of truth and cognition can greatly help mankind in enriching, deepening and enlarging human knowledge of total reality, in eliminating the mutually conflicting claims of science, religion, philosophy and ethics through reconciliation and unification of their real knowledge into one integrated system of truth, in stimulating man's creativity in all fields of culture and social life...."⁷

From the above, it becomes amply clear that our obsession with the sensate culture, which tells us that sense experience is the only experience and can only reveal reality, is flawed. This is not, however, to demean sensate mentality. The point is that human minds are not satisfied merely with eating, drinking and merriment. It demands something more. It is this demand that the ideational side can meet. The suprasensory side of reality is equally important and is the need of the hour. Material needs and spiritual demands are both requirements, but out of these two, the latter demand should dominate. Without a reasoned collaboration between the two, we cannot avert conflicts that are afflicting our society.

Another aspect of Sorokin's philosophy is his espousal of love energy in his policy sociology. He talks about different forms of love: physical, biological, social, psychological, ontological, ethical, and religious. Sometimes, he seems to call them different components of love. During his survey of various forms of love, he found ancient Indian scriptures appealing and held that they are a precious source. Some love, e.g., love for humanity of many spiritual vanguards (say, Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi), are 'unrequited'. These masters, in spite of their selfless love, were martyred. Hence, the moot question is, where do they get the energy for such altruistic love? Sorokin thinks that it should be searched outside conventional human channels. To the question of how to develop this energy, Sorokin says that

⁷ Sorokin, P. A. (1963) "Replay to my Critics". *Pitirim A. Sorokin in Review*, ed. Allen, P. J., Duke University: Durham, NC, p. 400.

self-mortification, which sometimes hermits make use of, may be one way to generate this energy.

Sorokin espouses a type of integral epistemology where he pleads to integrate senses, faith, and reason. Only their synthesis can lead us to fathom a harmonious whole of reality. We find him persuading his reader for a thorough appraisal of values in order to understand their importance and place them in hierarchical order. He questions the existing value hierarchy as he finds excessive emphasis on values comprehended through sense organs. Instead, he exhorts us to put a premium on values spoken of in different faiths. Sorokin talks of the distinctiveness of values but also holds that they are inextricably related to one another. Very appealingly, he writes: "The greatest values are not only inseparable from one another, but they are transformable into one another."⁸ Through this value dynamism, we discover new values that constitute man's real progress. He pleads to show the overture of incorporating these newfound values in the value network. He strongly argues that different branches of knowledge, such as science, logic and religion, can work together to track down the eternal values that can rightly shape 'man's mind and conduct.' He was not the one with those who hold that these different branches of knowledge are mutually exclusive. Instead, for him, their harmonious cooperation is very much possible, and it can place us in a better society. It is not antagonism but friendliness and amiableness that are required in interpersonal and inter-group relationships. If rightly promoted this teamwork, we shall be able to avoid many tragedies that we experience, such as war, crime, etc.

We frequently find that great thinkers and scientists turn to values that great religions or spiritual leaders teach us. A look at some religious values makes us think that these values help us to elevate ourselves to a level that teaches us to go beyond self-centeredness and convert our self-love to selfless love. Their teachings, such as compassion, benevolence, etc., make us think so. These virtues guide us to serve others, which can be done to reap good for others. Sorokin, almost like Sidgwick, gives different dimensions of selfless love. In all, he talks about five dimensions which are: earnestness, extensity, length, purity and adequacy. These

⁸ Burnett, Whit, Harper, and Brothers (ed.) (1957). *This is My Philosophy*. New York, p. 184.

dimensions of altruistic love can tell us effectively whether we have succeeded in edifying our ego-centric love to altruistic love. This is very much required as without it, 'love energy' has the potential to wreak havoc. As an example, we can cite the example of unreasonable nationalism, which can result in war. Sorokin could realise that 'love energy' has limitless power. If we can use this power, we can heal many of the tribulations our society is experiencing. Love, i.e., selfless love, is a powerful energy.

Another person, whose name we mentioned before and who I think can be helpful for our discussion, is the second Secretary General of the United Nations Organisation—Dag Hammarskjöld. In an interview given to Edward R. Murrow, he asserted that it is perfectly possible to live a life of active social service, which is also by his being (when it is not in accordance, A P J Abdul Kalam seems to call it 'disconnect'). He draws inspiration from medieval mystics in saying how it can be accomplished. For these mystics, "'self-surrender' had been the way to self-realisation." He repeatedly asserted that selfless service to humanity and the nation is immensely fulfilling in life. In several places, he seems to believe that merging one's self with the higher self is required to master the energy and courage for selfless service to humanity. In asserting that the road to holiness moves through the world of action, he gives a firm hint of his leanings toward some spirituality.

We find the rationale of the abovementioned view when we come to contemporary Indian thinkers' vision, though they articulated their view differently. These luminaries considered power as an expression of Eternal Power. As we have seen before, in Boulding's view, power is manifested in different ways. For example, power in politics is displayed differently from that of enlightened thinkers, e.g., Goutam Buddha. These enlightened thinkers employed their power to liberate humanity from mankind's untold suffering. Following their endeavour, we need a political set-up where power is used to free humanity from afflictions and guide them to follow the path of summum bonum of life. Somadeva Suri, in his *Nītivākyaṃitram*, explicitly states this as the goal of a state.

Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and other thinkers emphasised the need to unite power and wisdom on umpteen occasions. When

accomplished, power is used in a way that is consonant with morality. If not, any use of power is fraught with danger. Sri Aurobindo holds that moral conduct does not emanate from a mere blank. For him to act morally and apply power with wisdom, we need to be aware of the goal of our existence. The spiritual evolution he talks about in *The Human Cycle* has a specific goal. Ordinarily, we consider ourselves as an individual self. Once we think in this way, there is a proneness to enhance the power of this self, which is usually called ego. It is this quest for enhancement that makes us aware of the real nature of the self. Self is, for him, consciousness (*chit*). It has *śakti* or energy/power. In the *Letters on Yoga*, he says: "It is not individual strength depending on certain personal capacities, but the Divine Power using the individual as an instrument."⁹ He was not among those thinkers who held that for salvation, we need to shun power and live a life of recluse. We need to harmonise power with wisdom, harmony, and work. We need to integrate and balance power with the other three components of the Cosmic system (wisdom, harmony, and work). Understanding the spiritual origin and its divine character is essential.

Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and Subhas Chandra Bose held similar views about the origin and purpose of power. Power is not to be used to achieve any selfish end. It has a divine origin and a spiritual goal. These leading lights held great power over their people, and because of their knowledge about the origin and purpose of power, they could rightly use it.

British philosopher Bertrand Russell was troubled witnessing many states' naked use of power during his time. In his *Power: A New Social Analysis*, he says that if any power is not filtered by morality either in acquiring it, employing it or retaining it, it is nude power. For Russell, hunger for power springs from impulse and issues relating to power are primarily ethical problems. Therefore, Russell says that if morality does not refine power, it is nothing but a mere exhibition of naked power. This view brings him close to the Indian thinkers we mentioned before who held that power and wisdom must go hand in hand. The British philosopher shows

⁹Source: <http://www.collectedworksofsriaurobindo.com/index.php/readbook/09-Chapter-8-Vol-05-the-spiritual-significance-of-flowers> (accessed in September, 2024)

that many luminaries (e.g., Galileo, Goutam Buddha, and so on) exercised more power than any other individual person or a collective band. However, they were still not overpowered by power. These personalities underwent rigorous self-discipline, and in doing that, they elevated their inner world of desires and passions. Hence, they could use their immeasurable power to liberate the multitudes instead of enslaving them, of which we find umpteen instances around the globe.

V

The above exposition convincingly illustrates that there are unorthodox approaches to functioning compared to the conventional way of doing politics and political activities. We need to pay more attention to these exotic procedures. We find no reason to forbid a new path as the customarily practised path has not helped humanity sufficiently. This desideratum obligates us to tread on paths we delineated in the previous section. If we can ideate a better path, we have no reason to think that it is impossible or non-viable. If politics and morality go hand in hand, political standards can be elevated to a newer height, which will ultimately culminate into a state, what we may say, purging politics or spiritualising politics. It is in accordance with the desire of multitudes, satisfaction of the soul, as well as the truthful aim of political activities. Understandably, we cannot achieve the aim in one go. The terrain is indeed rugged; hence, moving towards the path mentioned above may be slow. However, a steady effort will help us to draw near the grail. This is not to claim that an epitome has been mapped out. Further research is required when we talk about infusing morality into politics. The arguable point is: what sort of morality can permeate political activity? There are many ethical lines of thinking; hence, the debate should centre around which line is appropriate for politics. We also need to determine whether, within the boundaries of ethics, there is any move made to gain a tactical end. This is an area which demands more research.

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