Religion's Place In the Politics of Ancient India
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Most of the states in ancient India were politically stable. They often remained for long periods free from internal squabbles and intrigues of the kind we see today. This situation helped them a great deal in initiating measures aimed at improving the quality of life of the common people. How could the states enjoyed political peace for long stretches of time to undertake such measures? The answer is that the origin of the state in ancient India was strongly believed to lay in dharma (religion) itself and, therefore, treated as an institution not to be opposed or disobeyed.

A close study of the scriptures of ancient India reveals that the people during the Vedic and later periods firmly believed that the state had been set up by god Himself. One of the India, Kautilya, held the view that God created the state for administering a benevolent yet strict rule over the people. Manu, the famous lawgiver, said that the state was needed to enforce discipline in the life prone to act in unrighteous ways.

Going through the stories of the way both small and large states in ancient India functioned, one will notice that not much distinction was made by the people between religion and government. The reason is that their socio-cultural background taught them to see everything through religious glasses. As in several other parts of the ancient world, the Indian king was treated as a god who had descended to the earth or as having divine sanction for ensuring a righteous administration for the welfare of the people. The king did not enjoy either the powers of a priest or the status of an expounder of sacred law, but his sanction or approval was needed for all major religious work. He was, however, under the influence of saints and seers who were brahmins by caste. His ministers, too, were of the same caste.

It is necessary here to clarify that the term dharma often used in India's scriptures to explain the importance of things metaphysical and spiritual in the lives of both elites and commoners is not the same as the English word religion. While the use of religion in any context refers to the existence of a creed, that of dharma conveys the existence of a universal law which describes the inherent nature of man to work for his merger into cosmic consciousness. The practice of a religion will often mean observing certain rituals and ceremonies, but that of dharma means living in one's life the ideals of love and affection for all, including plants and trees, and devotion for all, including plants and trees, and devotion to the Creator. The kings in ancient India or the states they presided over were believed to be the true followers of dharma and were, therefore, expected to excel in the practice of ideals of love, virtue and piety towards all - even their enemies. Dharma, if correctly understood, helped one in understanding and working for the realization of the true goal of existence. Since the state had its origin in dharma itself, it too was expected to work for the final goal of existence. Such a concept of the state is not found with any other civilization except that of the Hindus.

The character of the state in ancient India as described above explains why there was so much importance given to saints and seers in the polity and why they came to influence so much the work of the state is almost all spheres. It was under their inspiration that Hindu kings built magnificent temples, granted them large endowments and exercised strict supervision over them. Thus, the state in India 5,000 years ago was not secular as some biased scholars claim today. It was charged with the duty of working for the promotion of dharma which was, however, not dogmatic and ritualistic as has been sought to be made today by some Hindu sects in India for purely political and communal purposes. It is true that sometimes a king tried to be independent of the injunctions of dharma enforced by the saints and seers either from inside the royal courts or outside. But he was either replaced by another person committed to observing the injunction or he had to return to the path of virtue. We will give below more details about the dharma working as the basic of the functioning of the state in different important eras in ancient India.

Vedic Era (1500 to 900 BCE)

The king in the Vedic era had no priestly responsibilities such as the kings of ancient Egypt and Greece had. Unlike the rulers in these two countries, the king in India had a clear-cut division between his temporal and spiritual duties. While he was free to perform former duties in accordance with the law of dharma, he could carry out the latter only with the help of saints and seers. He had some of the saints called purohita specially installed in his court to supervise his spiritual duties.

This is clear from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two great epics of India. The purohita was not merely the priest of the royal household but also a public functionary who shared with the king the responsibility for the safety of the state. He can be compared with an archbishop of the Christian Church. He was a counselor of the king and the latter had to consult him while taking any major decision. The purohita accompanied the king to the battlefields and consecrated and blessed the war elephants and horses of the army before the fighting began. He offered prayers and made sacrifices for the victory of the king. Thus he played the role of a spiritual preceptor and both the king and his subjects looked up to him for guidance and blessing.

Those who are familiar with the story of the Ramayana know about the importance the sage Vashistha had in the court of King Dasaratha and later his son, Lord Rama. The spiritual (priestly) class which the purohita represented was thus certainly superior to the warrior class (kshatriyas). As the Vedic Age published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan reveals, the priestly class used the occasions of sacrificial meetings as public assemblies to discuss matters of military, civil and judiciary interests. It thus exercised control over the state administration.

The Brahmanic Era (900-500BCE)

The Vedic age in India was followed by a period when holy texts called Brahmanas were written, laying down social and political norms for the people to follow. It appears from these texts that the role of the spiritual class had become more prominent in this era. The religious rites and ceremonies, according to Satpath Brahmana, had become fairly settled by this time. The ethical rules too had been declared and were being firmly observed. The saints in the royal courts and outside continued to be the representatives of dharma. The king was only the protector of dharma and not head of any religion, as was the case in medieval Europe. Before one could become a king, his anointing by the priests was a must. Only when he went through his ceremony was he considered sacred and fit to work for the peace and security of the people.

The sacred law book of Gautama informs that the purohita had by this time become an 'institution' by himself. Vashistha says that those kshatriyas who were assisted by brahmins prosper and do not fall into distress. He further says that a realm where a brahmin is appointed domestic priest prospers. Another law giver, Baudhyan, says that the king should act according to the instruction of the purohita

and send all those who have transgressed his priest's orders to be adjudged by him alone. This makes it clear that the king had to accept the spiritual leadership of the priests and through them obey the injunction of dharma. The kingship in this age thus came to acquire a philosophical foundation, a spiritual sanction and a popular religious appeal for the people.

The fact that the influence of the saints and seers had become more powerful during this period is clear from the warnings the law givers have issued to the kings not to disobey dharmic injunctions. Gautama lays down in his Dharmasastra that no power of the king can touch the priests. The texts by some others say that the gods will spurn a king's oblations if he fails to employ a qualified brahman priest.

Mauryan Era (322 to 183BCE)

It appears from the records that the control of dharma on the state had begun to decline after the Brahmana period. This was, however, effectively arrested by Kautilya whose book called Arthasastra gives a deep insight into how the state came to be controlled once again by the priestly class. He was a great master of the science and craft of politics besides being a political philosopher and thinker of a high order. He once again brought the brahmanic system into the functions of the state. Through Chandra Gupta Maurya whom he installed as the king of the Magadha kingdom in Northeast India, Kautilya, also believed to be this same person as Chanakya, made the state responsible for the preservation and promotion of dharma.

Kautilya belonged to the class of purohits. It thus proves that purohits continued to enjoy considerable influence and power in the state. It seems that the brahmins had by this time emerged as a privileged class. Their privileges were also sanctified by the laws enforced by the state. Kautilya lays down that the purohita should not only be proficient in interpreting dharmic laws but also have adequate knowledge of astrology as well as omens and portents and the capacity for remedying human and providential calamities.

The king depended in this age on the purohita to help him face famines and droughts through the propitiation of gods like Indra and goddesses like Ganga. Even in the defense of the state against attacks by demons (rakshasas) the king

sought his priests support. Kautilya through his Arthasastra invested the kings of his time with divinity and the appearance of omniscience. He did so as he believed that only such a king could inspire his people to win a war against an enemy. This and some other instances like Arthasastra recommending the employment of brahmins as spies, nevertheless, give the indication that Kautilya did not hesitate to use religion and the members of the priestly class for political purposes.

Post-Mauryan (180BCE to 388CE)

Though the period that followed the Mauryan empire is not politically important, it draws the attention of scholars particularly because of the revival of a brahmanical order with a vengeance. This revival received support from the people because it was a time when many foreigners had begun to enter India and adopt Buddhism to find a place in the society. These foreigners were called mlecchas (despicable persons). The Mauryan empire was brought to an end by a brahmin named Pushyamitra Sunga. He was probably a minister in the court of the last Mauryan king and had revolted against the king and successfully established his own kingdom. Being a brahmin it was natural for him to re-establish the supremacy of the brahmanical order in the state. He is accused of having massacred a large number of Buddhists in his attempt to drive Buddhism out of his kingdom. There were other kingdoms apart from that of the Sungas who also helped the brahmanical order regain its earlier hold on the state. They were Satavahans and Bharasivas. The consecration ceremony and ashvamedha (horse) sacrifice in the post-Mauryan period became symbols of imperial suzerainty. The king once again began to be regarded as a god in human form. He was conferred the titles of Maheshvara (Great God) and Survaloka Ishwara (Universal God). This gave kings the divinity they had begun to lose. Even some foreign rulers like the Saka and Kushan kings too began adopting the titles like Devaputra (son of God) and Dharmika (spiritualist) in order to invest their status with divinity. Thus in the post-Mauryan era, the religion (dharma) once again began to dominate the State. And this brought back the saint and seers to the pivotal positions they had held earlier.

Gupta Era (320CE to 540CE)

The historical records in India of 350CE establish that the revival of the brahmanical order that had begun following the collapse of the Mauryan empire had reached its zenith in the Gupta period. The religion came to occupy a

predominant position in matters of state. The kings followed the brahmanical order but they were tolerant towards other religions also. Texts like Manusmriti and Markandeya Purana inform that the Gupta kings, whose period is described as the Golden Age of ancient India, had established themselves as enjoying the divine right to rule. They held titles like Paramesvara (Supreme God). They centralized all powers in their hands with the support of the saints and the ministers in their court who were mostly brahmins. According to Vishnu Purana, a belief in the divinity of the Gupta kings had become commonplace. They followed the injunctions of saints like Manu and Yagynavalkya that their ministers should be brahmins. Manu advised that the kings should consult the ministers first individually and then collectively.

The ancient period of India's history comes to an end with the collapse of the Vardhyaman dynasty (606 to 647CE) that followed the Gupta empire. The well-known king of this dynasty in Harshavardhan. He too followed the brahmanical order and gave the place of prominence to saints in his court.

One can say that the age of dharmic influence on the stage through eminent saints and seers which continued for several centuries - from the Vedic age to the Vardhan dynasty - with some ups and downs came to suffer a great decline by the seventh century when the Muslim invaders had begun to know at the doors of India.

With several saints in India's parliament today, questions are being asked if a new era of dharmic influence over the state is likely to begin soon. There are many who compare today's situation in India with that which prevailed when Lord Krishna was born. If it is true then His prediction that whenever dharma declines God incarnates Himself as a human being to fight the evil forces and re-establish its rule should come true now. The people with faith in God strongly believe that He has either already descended on earth as a human being or will do so soon. They claim that evil forces have come to dominate life so much today that it is beyond human beings to fight them - a situation similar to the one that prevailed on the eve of Lord Krishna's arrival.

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