

VEDIC CONCEPT OF WELFARE STATE

It is only logical to assume that a society which stood for such ideals like *Lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu* (Let everyone be happy in this world) would not have been indifferent towards the welfare of its own members. Fortunately, we do not have to go by assumptions and surmises in this regard since materials supporting this contention are available even in the earliest of the *Ṛgveda* hymns that might have been composed during the formative period of the organised state.

Origin of the state and kingship

Historians have described the early Vedic society as tribal in character in the sense that it consisted of clans in the form of expanded households with a number of clans together constituting a *Viśa* (settlement) and these *Viśas* combining together to form a *Rāṣṭra*. As a rule, monarchy appears to have been the system of government during the period when the *Ṛgveda* was composed and the term *Rājan*, thereby denoting a king or chieftain, is of frequent occurrence in the *Ṛgveda* ¹. One passage of the *Ṛgveda* speaks of a king living on the banks of the Sindhu and in another place there are references to a king with the

1. *Ṛgveda* I.126.1.

name of Citra living with other nobles in the neighbourhood of the river Sarasvatī ².

There are also detailed references to the historic battle of ten kings in which King Sudāsa, the ruler of the Bhāratas emerged victorious. Though the monarchical system appears to have become hereditary, we do come across terms which, in later times, were undoubtedly applied to non-monarchical constitutions. Thus, we get references to the *Gaṇa* with the *Gaṇapati* or *Jyeṣṭha* (elder) at its head, the latter word probably corresponding to the *Jeṭṭhaka* of the Pali texts. It may not be wrong to assume that these could be the germs of the republican states of the type we come across in the early Buddhist times ³.

In spite of occasional references to kings being elected we have to accept the fact that the office had become hereditary in the normal course. At the same time, there are simultaneous references to such bodies like the *Sabhā* and *Samiti* that were apparently playing an active role in assisting the state machinery in discharging its onerous responsibilities on one hand and as a curb on the arbitrary powers of a despotic monarch on the other. The term *Sabhā* has been used in the *Ṛgveda* as denoting essentially the people in conclave and also the physical structure ⁴, the hall where such assemblies were held. The term *Sabheya* means one worthy of being a member of such an assembly. It was the view of the ancient seers that worthy and enlightened people alone could properly apply their minds to such problems of administration. In subsequent treatises on polity, it has been made clear that a minister has to be a competent person for shouldering the responsibility, not one who has merely got the stamp of popular acceptability as is happening in many of the modern democracies. The *Samiti* as an assembly of Vedic tribes getting occasional references in the *Ṛgveda* ⁵ must have been a larger body including the common people also.

It has not been possible to make out a clear distinction between the two bodies, the *Sabhā* and the *Samiti* or between the functions

2. *Ṛgveda* VIII.21.80.

3. The Bharatiya Itihasa Samiti's *History and Culture of the Indian people*, Vol. I, The Vedic Age.

4. *Ṛgveda* VI.28.6; VIII.4.9.

5. *Ṛgveda* I.98.8; IX.92.

discharged by them. It is, however, quite clear that both these assemblies exercised considerable authority and could even have some control over the arbitrary acts of a despotic ruler. In ideal conditions, all of them worked in harmony for a common goal. This is the hope and prayer contained in the last and final hymn of the *R̥gveda* starting with:

<i>saṁ gachhadhvam</i>	<i>saṁ vadadvham</i>
<i>sam vo manāṁsi jānatām</i>	
<i>samano mantrāḥ</i>	<i>santiḥ samanī</i>
<i>samānani manah</i>	<i>saha chittameṣām</i>
<i>samani va ākūtiḥ</i>	<i>samana hridayāni vaḥ</i>
<i>samanamastu vo mano</i>	<i>yathā vaḥ susahasati.</i>

Which means:

“Assemble, speak together; let your minds be all of one accord,

“The place is common, common the assembly, common the mind, so be their thoughts united.

“One and the same be your resolve, and be your minds of one accord

“United be the thoughts of all that may happily agree.”

What has been discussed in greater detail in treatises on polity about the origin of kingship and the king's status do find place in the Vedic texts also. Any precept becomes fully acceptable if it is shown as *Vedasammitaḥ*, deriving its authority from the Vedic texts. Some times these are discussed in situations arising in the land of celestials with gods as actors and beneficiaries. It has been mentioned in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* that the gods were being repeatedly defeated by the demons which made them ponder over it and come to the conclusion that they required a king who would be an effective leader ⁶.

In another place of the same *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, it has been mentioned once again Gods headed by *Prajāpati* said to one another. This one is among the gods, the most vigorous, the most strong, the most valiant, the most perfect who carries out best any work. Let us install him in the kingship ⁷.

6. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* I.I.14.

7. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* VIII.4.12.

It is being made clear that the king is in office on the basis of acceptability to the people and has to be possessed of certain qualifications and accomplishments.

Social contract and divine right theories

The two opposing theories of Divine Right and Social Contract had their own influence on the political history of the post-renaissance Europe and the new continent, leading to different forms of government. Not one of them seems to have stood the final test of time. The Stuarts of England propagated the Theory of Divine Right which brought one of them to the scaffold and finally ended in the Glorious Revolution that recognised the people's right to choose their leader. The Theory of Social Contract actively propagated by Jean Jacques Rousseau brought in the French revolution that completely transformed the character of governments in the centuries that followed. It is not a new discovery that the Theory of Social Contract had found its place not only in the treatises on politics of the post-Upanishadic period but in the Vedic texts of *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas* as well though in a nascent form. The theory of Divine Right was perforce brought in because something with divine sanction would have earned greater acceptability. The fact that the king got installed, whether in the terrestrial land or in heaven, to meet a particular challenge makes it abundantly clear that the one chosen to meet the challenge had to shoulder certain specific responsibilities. It is the *Atharva Veda* which deals with such matters in greater detail. Sage Vasiṣṭha who was the family priest and political advisor to the Ikṣvākus has been described as one well-versed in *Atharva Veda*. The king's powers were on the increase by now and the *Atharvan* priest who was the chief functionary in the coronation ceremony started making this point quite clear. The coronation hymn of the *Atharva Veda* exhorts the king:

1. To you has come the kingdom, with splendour rise forward;
as lord of the people, sole king, rule;
Let all the quarters call you, O king,
may all wait on you and pay you homage.

2. Let the people choose you for kingship
 let these five divine quarters (choose you);⁸
 Rest at the summit and pinnacle of your kingdom
 and from there share out riches to us.

Reference to choice by the people makes it clear that the king is acceptable to the people. There could be occasions when the king may not be elected as a matter of course. Even like the monarchy, the popular assemblies of *Samiti* and *Sabha* have been placed on the same footing as divine institutions according to *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

In the *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* there are two separate references to the creation of the institution known as King, somewhat divergent from each other, but both enunciating the same principle. In reply to a query made by Yudhiṣṭhira: «Why there is so much dependence on one human being who is like any other for propitiating the whole world?»⁹ Bhīṣma narrates an episode relating to the origin of kingship. In the *Kṛta* age the society flourished without a king or law court for a long time, but later somehow there was a moral degradation. People fell from rectitude; greed, selfishness and cupidity began to sway their mind and the earthly paradise which they had been enjoying was soon converted into a veritable hell. The law of the jungle began to prevail; the strong devoured the weak, as is the order of the day among the fish (*matsyanyāya*). Gods then became alarmed and decided to remedy the situation when men went out in a deputation to pray for relief. Brahmadeva, the chief god, thought over the matter and came to the conclusion that human society can survive only if a code of law was framed and enforced through the instrumentality of a king. He composed a comprehensive code, created an asexual son named Virajas, appointed him king and men agreed to obey his orders¹⁰.

The glorious one Virajas who was created for shouldering the responsibility appears to have become disinclined towards worldly affairs and even so was his successor Kardama. The great monarch

8. Quoted from vedic age and Bharatiya Vidyabhawan (1957).

9. Mbh. Ch. XII, verses 5-12.

10. Cf. A.S. ALTEKAR, *State of Government in Ancient India*, 1972.

Anaṅga qualified as Nītimān (one who follows the correct code of conduct) kept his subjects happy and prosperous. When his successor Vena turned out to be wicked and oppressive, he was annihilated by the great hermit and out of his ashes they churned out a glorious being renowned as the great monarch Pṛthu who utilised the resources of the earth for the benefit of the people. The most learned preceptor Śukra become his priest and counsellor ¹¹.

Elsewhere in the same epic a different account has been given about the origin of monarchy. In a state of anarchy where *mat-syanyāya* prevailed, the strong ones persecuting the weak even like the big fish swallowing the small ones, people are reported to have come to an agreement amongst themselves and approached the Supreme Lord Brahmā soliciting him to send to them a monarch who would protect them and look after their interests. Manu who was presented to them as their king was, in the beginning unwilling to assume the responsibility of ruling over a refractory populace. There is no reference to the Creator solving the difficulty by composing a law code. The matter was settled between the ruler and the subjects with the people assuring Manu that he could administer the land, protecting the virtuous and punishing the wicked. They offered to give him a part of their earnings, one in every fifty parts of gold and one in hundred of kine and of income from other sources. He could live in great glory and enforce his will in the best interest of the people ¹². The theories of Divine Origin and of Social Contract have been reconciled in this case.

Even with the divergences found in the two accounts there is one thing common that the ruler came into the picture for protecting and looking after the subjects. The story of Vena finds mention in some of the *Purāṇas* and the *Harivamśa* also. This episode is of special significance since it is being asserted that the people had the right to depose a monarch if he turned out to be oppressive. The element of social contract is present in both accounts and it is also mentioned that such an arrangement became necessary when the society became degenerate.

11. Mbh.Ch. XII verses 87-141.

12. Mbh. Ch.XII verses 15-38.

Whether the theory of Social contract enunciated by the western political thinkers had drawn from oriental sources directly or indirectly could be a matter of study and research but there are some marked similarities between the two. According to Rousseau man in the state of nature was a noble savage who led a life of primitive simplicity and idyllic happiness. In the beginning he was independent, contented, self sufficient, healthy and fearless. Trouble arose with increase in population and the dawn of reason. With fixed home and established family, man began to think in terms of mine and thine. When things started deteriorating further, they got together and expressed their general will. Hobbes has taken a different view regarding the state of nature in the primitive society. Men had no sense of right and wrong and they fell upon each other with savage ferocity. That is the condition in which the concept of Leviathan came in. All the accounts do, however, dwell upon the fact that order was established through a social contract undertaken voluntarily by the people.

Resources for a welfare state

One cannot think about a welfare state without adequate resources for ensuring the prosperity of the people. By equitable distribution of poverty people can not live in happiness. The rulers and administrators of the state have to perforce think about the generation of resources that would sustain the population at a certain level of material prosperity. Resources come out of the bounties of nature, from the four primary elements in the form of earth, water, air and light combined with a fifth one, which in the field of economic development could be identified as the human resource, the energy and intellect of the people that could draw the best out of the other four resources. The seers of ancient India seem to have taken a lot of pains in the identification of resources and their potentiality. There are innumerable references in the Vedic texts to many such resources which are dealt with in greater detail in the subsidiary texts and treatises dealing with *Artha* or worldly acquisitions. These have also been dealt with in the two epics and more elaborately in some of the *Purāṇas*. Though some of these accounts are not without embellishments and exaggerations,

tions the scientific content is of great value in many cases. Some of them deal with the topography of the land with a detailed account of mountains, rivers and other water bodies, with the nature and characteristics of soils, the flora and fauna of different regions, meteorological data and various natural phenomena and calamities. The rulers and administrators were expected to be conversant with the *sastras* dealing with such matters. Admittedly, resource identification is the first step towards resource utilisation and regeneration.

Training and education

A ruler or administrator who is to work for the well being of the people can not ever hope to shoulder this responsibility successfully unless he has the required knowledge and training. Great emphasis has therefore been laid on the acquisition of knowledge along with the development of character. In his exposition of *Rājanīti* Bhīṣma dwells at length on the code of conduct that is to be observed by the king. He has to give proper respect to brāhmaṇas and always be in consultation with his chief priest or spiritual advisor in matters relating to *Dharma*. From the very start it is being made clear that in the pursuit of the other goals he should never go against the precepts of *Dharma*. Straightforward in his dealings, he should not allow himself to be subdued by base sentiments like anger, greed, jealousy and pride. Kauṭilya also emphasises this point while describing the life of the saintly king. According to him, restraint of the organs of sense on which success in study and discipline depends can be enforced by abandoning lust, anger, greed, vanity, haughtiness and excessive joy ¹³. Himself well educated he can function effectively only with the assistance of proper counsellors. "Sovereignty (*rājatva*) is possible only with assistance. A single wheel can never move ¹⁴". Detailed qualifications have been laid down for ministers and their purity of character has to be carefully tested according to Kauṭilya ¹⁵.

13. SHAMA SASTRY, Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, (1967) Book. I Ch. VI. p. 10.

14. Ibid. - Ch. VII concluding verse.

15. Ibid. - Ch. IX and X.

In spite of the principle of *Varṇāśramadharmā* leading to each *varṇa* concentrating on its own special field, the ruler was expected to be well read in all the *śāstras*. According to Kauṭilya, *Ānvikṣikī*, the triple Vedas (*Trayī*), *Vārta* and *Danḍanīti* are known as the four sciences. The triple Vedas definitely determine the respective duties of the different classes while the science of *Ānvikṣikī* keep the mind steady and firm in weal and woe alike and bestows excellence of foresight, speech and action ¹⁶.

Vārta and Danḍanīti

For ensuring the happiness and prosperity of the people the most dominant role is played by *Vārta* and *Danḍanīti*. Agriculture, cattle breeding and trade constitute *Vārta* according to Kauṭilya's definition but, in the present context it should be taken as including industrial development also. According to Kauṭilya, it is most useful in that it brings in grains, cattle, gold, forest produce (*kūpya*) and free labour (*viṣṭi*). It is by means of the treasury and the army obtained solely through *Vārta* that the king can hold under his control both his own and his enemy's party ¹⁷. Kauṭilya further states that the progress of all these sciences of *Ānvikṣikī*, *Trayī* and *Vārta* depend on the proper administration of justice, what is known as *Danḍanīti*. According to him "*Danḍa* is the law of punishment and the science of government (*Danḍanīti*). It is a means to make acquisitions, to keep them secure, to improve them and to distribute among the deserved the profits of improvement. It is on this science of government, the course of the progress of the world depends". Quoting his preceptor he adds, "Hence, whoever is desirous of the progress of the world shall ever hold the sceptre raised (*Udyatadanḍa*) ¹⁸".

Administration of justice has to be done with a lot of discernment. If the punishment is too harsh, the ruler becomes repulsive to the people but if it is too mild he becomes contemptible. If the law of punishment

16. Ibid. - Ch. II.

17. SHAMA SASTRY, Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, (1967) Book. I. Ch. IV.

18. Ibid. - Ch. IV.

is kept in abeyance it gives rise to disorders and may ultimately turn into *matsyanyāya*, what is happening in many parts of the world today due to lack of governance as represented by *Danḍa*. It is often mentioned that the people will take after the ruler with the axiom *Yathā rāja tathā prajāḥ*. If the king himself is righteous in his dealings the subjects will also behave properly. On the other hand, if the rulers and administrators start amassing wealth through corrupt practices people will also become corrupt. This could be interpreted in the reverse order also when we take into consideration the fact that the political sovereignty in a democracy rests with the people. If the people are not righteous and are themselves without character they would like to have a government that is corrupt and degraded. That is why even in fairly conducted elections some of the most corrupt leaders are being voted to power, not infrequently.

Emphasis on clean administration

A ruler had to be above suspicion if he was to command the respect of the people and of his own administrators and emissaries who were answerable to him. Kauṭilya and his predecessors were greatly concerned about the conduct of government servants entrusted with the collection of revenue and other financial responsibilities. It has been recommended “Without dissension and without any concert among themselves they shall carry on their work as ordered. When in concert they eat up the revenue. When in disunion they mar the work”. He further adds “Just as fish moving under water cannot possibly be found out either drinking or not drinking water, so government servants employed in the government work can not be found out while taking money for themselves. It is possible to mark the movements of birds flying high up in the sky; but not so is it possible to ascertain the movement of government servants of hidden purpose ¹⁹”.

With such forebodings in his mind, Kauṭilya has tried to enumerate all possible methods of embezzlements and obstructions and has also suggested the types of punishments that should be meted out to the offenders. Heavy penalties were invariably imposed on the offen-

19. SHAMA SASTRY, Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, Book II Ch.IX.

ders in the form of fines that may be two times, four times and even eight times of the loss caused to the public exchequer.

Varṇas and social discriminations

It is often being pointed out by discerning critics that India has always been a caste ridden society with discrimination against those who are being castigated as belonging to lower castes. This is certainly a justifiable criticism when we take into consideration the society as it was during the later periods of history. It is also being argued that the legend regarding the origin of *varṇas* is itself discriminatory against the lower *varṇas*. In the Vedic literature we come across a passage where it is mentioned that the *brāhmaṇa* came from the face of the Ultimate Brahman, the *kṣatriya* from his arms, the *vaiśya* from his thighs and the *śūdra* from the leg. Originating from the leg, *śūdra* is being given the lowest status. If we go through the original Vedic literature with care it will be seen that the *varṇas* were being advocated in the interest of developing professional skills in particular groups and vocations and was not meant to be discriminatory. Each *varṇa* had to be specialising in its own vocation and gaining more and more expertise in the particular field on the principle which affirms that skill in one's own vocation is the highest form of yoga, *Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*. Even the origin from the leg was not meant to be a degrading factor. Śūdras constituted the group of persons who were involved in such essential activities like the cultivation of land involving physical labour and a good deal of skill. The arms wielded the weapons no doubt, but, the leg did not play any lesser role. In fact, it is the most active limb of the body and identifying the labour class with the leg was not meant to be discriminatory. When the society changed, due to the manipulations of the higher caste groups with vested interests, different interpretations were being given. This was the most unfortunate development in the history of India.

On going through the Vedic texts carefully it will become quite clear that the society had not been put into a rigid armor through the *varṇāśramadharmā*. Some of the hymns of the *Rgveda* make it clear that the *varṇa* system was not meant to be hereditary. A *brāhmaṇa*

who does not take to the pursuit of his own dharma ceases to be one and can not claim the privilege of his original *varṇa*. A hymn of non-religious origin addressed to Soma has been translated as follows:

Diverse indeed are our aims,
different are the tasks of men,
The builder seeks for cracks, leeches for the sick,
and priests are greedy for sacrifices.

With seasoned timber of ancient trees
and the feathers of birds,
The goldsmith seeks those who possess gold,
ready with his furnaces and precious gems.

A bard I am, my father a leech,
and my mother is a grinder of corn;
Diverse in means, but all wishing wealth,
equally we strive for cattle.

The hymn does not leave us in any doubt on the point that during the period of its composition birth by itself was not the basis for determining the caste. Evidently each profession had its own exalted place. The rigid caste system into which it subsequently developed was certainly against the concept of a welfare state but that is a corruption that crept in later.

Attitude towards war and peace

While dealing with *kṣatriyadharma*, the right code of conduct for the warrior class, it has been mentioned on innumerable occasions that death in the battle field should be the most cherished goal for a *kṣatriya*. Through death in the battle field one attains heaven with all those enjoyments that are relished by human beings. It has also been repeatedly mentioned that a king should go out for conquests regularly and should not ever remain idle. In Bhāsa's play *Pancarātram* it is also mentioned that a king would not leave his acquisitions to his son who would inherit from him only the sword. Whatever is gained through conquests is to be distributed amongst those who have been recommen-

ded as deserving. The son is to enter on his march of conquests after he becomes consecrated as ruler. Does it really mean that we were a nation of war mongers? This is a point on which we should come to a conclusion after going through all available literature on the subject.

It is being made clear that a ruler has to give full protection to his subjects and should not allow the enemy to overrun his kingdom. Attack must have been considered as the best form of defence. If a ruler does not remain aggressive the enemies around may take advantage of it attributing it to his weakness. Again, if a ruler who is always the commander-in-chief of his forces were to turn his back on the enemy the whole force will become demoralised. That is why he was being urged to die in battle rather than surrender to the enemy. Strength with restraint was laudable whereas restraint without strength become laughable. The ruler is also being urged to enter into alliances and wherever possible try to create dissensions in the ranks of his foes. It has been asserted in the *Vamadevagītā* of the *Śānti Parva* in *Mahābhārata* that a ruler should try to ensure his victory without a war wherever possible. Victory through armed conflict is only an inferior victory. When it is being made out that the institution of kingship came up for protecting the people, it goes without saying that is is the duty of the ruler to keep himself in readiness all the time for meeting external aggressions. In a welfare state it was the duty of the ruler to protect his subjects on one hand and make them flourish and progress on the other.