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Dr. Priyanka Pandey

Post DOC Fellow, JNU, ICSSR,
New Delhi, India

The institution of state: As described in mahabharata

Dr. Priyanka Pandey

Abstract

As regards the answer to the question, 'which is the greatest literary creation in human history', Unequivocal answer is: the great Indian Epic *Mahābhārata* composed according to ancient Indian texts by the great sage and scholar Vyasadeva. The epic touches upon all aspects of human life, the complexities of human relations embracing all the conceivable strata of the society, the multifarious dimensions of clashes and contradictions & intricacies of the economical political issues, the objectives and modus operandi of a welfare oriented state ensuring growth, equity and justice - in a nutshell, the essence of human knowledge embedded in all the ancient Indian texts on religion, laws, statecraft, economics and extra-mundane philosophy. Its comprehensive character has been duly expressed in the epic verse, "What is here found here may be found elsewhere, but what is not found in it cannot be found anywhere." It throws abundant light on the specific character of the ancient Indian society and furnishes facts and circumstances hardly available from any other sources.

In the epic various social institutions are elaborately described which are responsible for regulating the social life of the man and playing the important role in maintaining peace and order in the society. A developed social life is possible only if there are well organised social institutions these institutions are Education, Marriage, Family and State etc. Among these Institutions State is the most prominent Institution. In the present paper the most focus will be to describe the institution of state, how it functions and what are the goals of the state for the society.

Keyword: State, Mahabharata, king, dharma, trivarga, law, judiciary

Introduction

The state is a beneficent institution which enables an efficient realisation of individual's salvation and promotion of social values. The state tries to regulate the anti- social elements by the use of force, protects the virtuous and the law-abiders and thereby establishes a rule of law and justice in the society. According to the ancient Indian Thinkers, the state is an institution which tries to stimulate virtue, regulate social order and keep the individuals bound to their duties with a view to promoting material and spiritual welfare of each and all.

The Mahabharata deals with the functions of the state under different nomenclature such as Daṇḍanīti^[1], Rajdharm^[2] Nīti or Rājśtra or Kṣatradharma. It regards the state as an institution which tries to regulate the conduct of its constituents for the promotion of virtue, peace and progress of all and elaborately discuss various aspects of state-activity.

The Mahabharata conceives the state as an organism with seven limbs^[3] namely the king, ministers, treasury, army, allies, and land with population and capital with fort. According to the epic, these elements are various political categories with distinct tasks. Each one is particularly qualified to accomplish the task assigned to it. Hence, none can be regarded as more important than the other. Precedence is given to that one which is more efficacious at the particular point of time. Hence, each of the above categories is equally valuable for the effective functioning of a state. The Mahabharata thus recognises functional unity of the limbs of the state^[4].

¹ Mbh. Santi, 122.25,

Tamācca dharmacarannitirdevi Saraswati|

Sasrīje dharmacarannitirdevi Saraswati ||

² Ibid., Śanti, 59.138

³ Mbh., Śanti, 69.64-65

⁴ Śanti, 320.158, tesu tesu hi kālesu tattadangaṃ visisyate|

Yena yat sidhayate karyaṃ tat prādhānyāya kalpate||

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Priyanka Pandey

Post DOC Fellow, JNU, ICSSR,
New Delhi, India

Among the Various constituting elements of the state, the king is regarded as the most significant. In ancient India, monarchy was the normal form of the government and the state was usually identified with the king. The king was the executive head of the state and the arbiter of the destiny of the people.

He wielded wide powers and practically controlled every aspects of state-activity. But the Mahabharata regards him as a highly responsible person fully dedicated to the service of the people. In view of the important task he performs, he is virtually deified and held as the personification and embodiment of power. The king is described as a great divinity in human form ^[5]. Because of performing different task he resembles different deities at different times.

Like Agni, he controls the sinners; like the sun he protects the people; like Yama, he destroys the wicked and encourages the good; like Mrtyu, he punished the unrighteous; and like Kubera, he bestows donations on the benevolent and fines the malevolent ones ^[6].

The Mahabharata does not favour autocracy or royal tyranny. King is held as dedicated servant of the people, subject to law and never above law. Various checks and limitations are imposed on his powers. The Mahabharata gives a long list of qualification which are required of him and duties he is expected to perform.

Before taking charge, the king is required to honor his ministers and take the coronation oath. This oath indicates that the country which he is going to rule is a divine trust put under his care. So, it requires that he should rule it righteously and abstain from oppressing people. Thus, as in modern times, during the Mahābhārata days also, the king was expected to rule not personally but with the help of his colleagues. The administrative powers were not centralised in his sole hands but were diffused in the hands of so many persons, such as the priests, the ministers, the legislators, jurists and many other officials.

In Mahabharata king is the guardian of the moral social order and the protector of the people. Hence, he is required to be duly qualified for the job. Epic requires him to be a philosopher, a wise man, well versed in the Vedas and vedangas and sincere in the discharge of his duties. He should be obliging, simple, kind and self restrained. Character and self control, tender-natured, virtuous and pleasing. The king is required to be very industrious and dutiful. People generally follow a king if he performs wrong deeds so do people, but then they are ruined. So the epic Mahabharata requires the head of the state to be very careful in his conduct. He must cultivate important virtues and abstain from vices. He should be an ideal personality dedicated to his duties and set a noble example to be imitated by the people.

The king, according to the Mahabharata, has to perform important duties as the head of the state. The destiny of the entire community depends upon his conduct. Hence, his duties and functions are very elaborately discussed. As the state or the king renders valuable services to the society, people are required to be obedient and obliged to the state. This goes to prove that the state in the Mahabharata times was a beneficent social institution.

According to Mahabharata, the state has been created primarily to remove anarchy, lawlessness and to save people from the law of fish. In Anarchy, there is no security either of wealth or women or even of life. There is chaos and confusion

everywhere. Righteous people suffer and sinners increase. Dharma completely disappears and the world becomes hellish. So, the state was created and the king was appointed to save the society from this state of affairs.

Establishment of Dharma is, therefore the most important task of a king. It alone helps the removal of anarchy and promotion of social welfare ^[7]. Promotion of Dharma depends on the king ^[8]. The king is directed to see that people do observe their duties according to their inherent capacity and order of development ^[9]. For this alone can ensure realisation of individual as well as good ^[10]. Thus civilisation of virtues and promotion of happiness are the ideals of the state. According to Mahabharata, Dharma must be perused along with arth and Kama ^[11]. The state has to exert to promote peoples complete material and spiritual progress. It must, therefore, promote trivarga leading to realisation of mokṣa. The king has to perform many philosophers acts such as constructing water reservoir leading to realisation of mokṣa. The king has to perform many philanthropic acts such as constructing water reservoir and channels for the distribution of water, looking after the welfare of orphans and widows ^[12], helping the blind and helpless, removing beggary, protecting trees, exercising control on drinking shops, public women, actors, gamblers etc.

According to Mahabharata, the state is assigned the task of promoting justice or danḍa. When danḍa disappears there is no security of law and life, morality and property. That's the reason why is a strong machinery needed and state came in to existence. All the authorities admit that the King (svāmi, ātman) is an important element of the state. In the Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya and Manusmṛti, the king occupies an important place in the saptāṅgas of the state. It is first and foremost of constituents of the state. In the Śānti Parva Bhīṣma has dwelt upon his importance, qualities, duties and responsibilities at great length. According to him king is an inevitable agency for the welfare of the people. It is clearly stated that without a king, even one's better half and property is not safe. While discussing the importance of king, Bhīṣma tells about the kingless state i.e., anarchical state. Bhīṣma condemns anarchy by saying that in a kingless state Dharma disappear totally ^[13]. Sinners and robbers get an opportunity to deprive others of their belongings. Human welfare becomes impossible. Those who are not slaves, are forcibly made slaves, Matsya Nyāya the law of fish, in the order words, 'might is right' is practiced ^[14]. King is the one who can control such a situation-

Rājācena bhvelloke pṛthivyaḍaṇḍadhārakaḥ |

Jale matsyānivābhakṣayan durbalaṃ balavattaraḥ ||

It is also stated that without a king the people are as a herd of cattle without the herdsman. So the latter must bow down even to the enemy king victor if their own king fails to protect them ^[15] in Śānti Parva, it has also been stated that in

⁷ Mbh., Śānti Parva, 90.3

⁸ Ibid., Ādi Parva, 41.29

⁹ Ibid., Śānti Parva, 57.15

¹⁰ Ibid., Bhīṣma Parva, 42.5

¹¹ Ibid., Sabha, 5.20

¹² Ibid., Śānti., 86.15 and ibid., Sabhā, 5.78

¹³ Arājakeṣu rāṣṭreṣu dharmo na vyatiṣṭhate | Ś.P., 67.3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 67, 16-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67.11. cf. "Giuded by those instances, o hero, men should bend before those that are powerful person really bends his head to Indra. Ibid., LXII, p. 145.

⁵ Mbh. Śānti, 68.40

⁶ Ibid., 68.41-47

anarchical state, fire (Agni) does not convey the libration to the gods.

Nārājakeṣu rāstreṣuu vastavyamiti rocaye |
Nārājakeṣu rāstreṣu havyamagnirvahtyutaḥ ||^[16]

A kingless state is deplorable^[17] because the kingless subject (prajānāthā) meets its end, all the acts prove futile, rain do not pour and gods are not worshiped^[18]. Nobody follows the Dharma in an anarchical state, because it is the king on whom Dharma depends^[19]. Thus in absence of a king, peace, order, justice, religion, morality and life became impossible and their contraries prevail prominently. Bhīṣma suggested that one should not live in such a State. Manu has also expressed his view about such a state. According to him the condition of a kingless state are dreadful. Therein people run about out of terror^[20]. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa favours the same view^[21]. In the opinion of Śukra, people become miserable in the absence of a king, like the boats drowned in a sea in the absence of a pilot. People do not do their prescribed duties (svadharmā)^[22].

So by emphasizing the necessity and importance of a king, Bhīṣma regarded that appointment of a king as the foremost duty of the people, because king is the one who could remove chaos and establish Dharma.²³ Those who desirable prosperity, should first elect and crown a king for the protection of all. As stated-

Tato mahim paripayau parjanya iva vṛṣṭimān |
Śāmayan sarvataḥ pāpaṃ svakarmeṣu ca yojayan ||^[24]

From these accounts it become clear that the necessity of king was felt in order to maintain Dharma and to get rid of disorder. Śānti parva focuses light on the necessity of the king because he is the maker of age. It is the king who causes the Kṛta, the Tretā on the Dwāpara and the Kāli, the king should be righteous because only in the kingdom of the righteous king, people sleep happily and wake up in the happiness. The institution of the kingship stands for the protection of helpless people who are oppressed by the powerful ones.

Bhīṣma justifies the kingship because peace and prosperity of subjects, sufficiency and seasonableness of rain, disease, death and other fears are dependent upon the king, hence he is considered as Rājamūla (root of the kingdom)^[25]. The king is a writ in large. State is trust and he is a trustee. Śāntiparva asserts that the people follow the great ones and the subjects follow the king. Hence king should observe his duties without wrath and malice. He should not abandon kindness. He should acquire wealth without persecution and cruelty. He should pursue pleasure without attachment^[26]. A code of conduct is prescribed for the king. King is the head of the state. He has to deal with judicial, taxation, religious and cultural problems.

¹⁶ Ibid., 67.5

¹⁷ Śocyam rāstramarājakaṃ || Ibid., LXVIII

¹⁸ Arājakeṣu rāstreṣu prajānāthā vinaśyati

Naśyati ca kriyāḥ Sarva nāsti vṛṣṭirna devatā || Ādi, CIV.44

¹⁹ Ś.P., LXXIII, 20-2.

²⁰ Manu.Sm., VII.3.

²¹ I.13, 31-2.

²² Ś.P., 65.6.

²³ Ibid., 67.2.

²⁴ Ibid., 67.32.

²⁵ Ibid., 59.138.

²⁶ Ibid., 71.3.

He has to protect and regulate the Varṇa organization and Āśrama system. He is more important than others.

It has been stated that king is the one who can establish the social order he is responsible for the economic and social progress of the people. It is his duty to commend his Amātyas and Tirthās to streamline the administration. He is under the command of the Dharma and Daṇḍa. He had to take care of all the constituents for each one of them^[27]. In all ages the king, by and large, proved to be the backbone of the state.

The king in the epic is held as a dedicated servant of the people, subject to law and never above law. He has to perform important duties as the head of the state. Establishment of Dharma is the most important task of a king. It alone helps the removal of anarchy and promotion of the social welfare^[28]. Promotion of Dharma depends on the king^[29]. Protection of his people from the external and internal danger is the foremost duty of the king. Thus in Mahabharata the king is regarded as the maintainer of the entire social order^[30].

Conclusion

A perusal of above discussed scenarios it becomes clear that state is originated for the protection of life and property of people. Establishment of Dharma has been deemed to be the most important functions of the state in Mahābhārata. It justifies the existence of sovereignty on the ground that it maintains dharma. It goes to the extent of saying that it is for the sake of dharma that sovereignty exists- "*Dharmāya bhavati rājā na kāmakaraṇāya tu.*" The foremost aim of the state is to protect people from evil doers. The prosperity of the people depends on their duties which they have to perform and it should be according to injunctions of Dharma, so it the end of the state to persuade all its subjects to perform their duties. All these things are occluded without economic prosperity, so the king should do more for economic well-being of their people.

One's life is incomplete without attempts made for the attainment of Mokṣa-liberation from sorrows, so it the foremost duty of the state to help people in this respect. It promotes the cause of Dharma, persuades people to perform their duties and to follow the rules of morality. These are the factors that lead one to the attainment of liberation. Thus, the welfare of the people is the main aim of the state. It stands for the fulfillment of four fold objectives of human life.

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²⁷ Ś.P., 59.64.

²⁸ Ibid., Śānti, 90.3

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