

Origin and Development of Kingship in Ancient India

Vedic literature mentions that during the frequent fights between the gods and demons, it was the latter who always emerged victorious. The gods therefore assembled and deliberated upon and came to the conclusion that their defeat was due to they not having a king. They decided to make Indra as king. Varuna also wanted to be the king of gods but his claim was rejected by the gods. This indicates that kingship arose out of a military necessity.

According to the *Mahabharata* in the early years of Krita Yuga there was no sovereignty, no king and no government. All men used to protect one another righteously. After some time however they found the task of righteously protecting each other painful. Error began to assail their hearts. Having subject to error, the perception of men became clouded and as a consequence their virtues began to decline and chaos descended. The gods then approached Brahma for protection and advice. Brahma created by a fiat of his will, a son named Virajas and made him the ruler of the world.

According to *Arthashastra*, when anarchy prevailed, people agreed to elect Manu Vaivasvata as their king and agreed to pay one-sixth of the produce of the soil and one-tenth of merchandise as his remuneration. In return, the king guaranteed social welfare of the people by suppressing the act of mischief.

According to Buddhist canonical work *Digha Nikaya*, paddy was the main crop in eastern India. The chief discord was hoarding of rice by some people over and above what they required for their consumption and stealing of rice from the fields. Hence people assembled and agreed to choose a chief to prevent such occurrence mentioned above. In return they agreed to contribute him a portion of their paddy. That individual had three titles like Mahasammata i.e. chosen by the whole people, Khattiya i.e. lord of the fields and Raja i.e. one who pleases by means of dharma or act.

Jinasena, a Jain author of the 9th century holds that the earth was a paradise in the distant past, when all human wants were satisfied by desire yielding trees (Kalpavrikshas). These trees however disappeared and there was a chaos. But order was restored by the first Thirtankara, Rishabanatha who introduced kings, officers, castes and professions.

Citing from Shantiparva of *Mahabharatha*, R.S.Sharma claim that in the early stage of man's life, the institution of state did not exist. Only with the development of the institution of marriage, family and private property, the right thinking persons in the society may have started feeling the need of a person who would provide them with protection. It was felt that in the absence of the state there will be anarchy. Wife of one person would be kidnapped by the other and the property of one person would be snatched by the other. Hence R.S.Sharma feel that there is a vital connection between the existence of institutions like property, family and class and the rise of the state.

According to Prof. Altekar the institution of the joint family gradually led to the evolution of kingship. The patriarch of the family was revered and obeyed and this reverence and obedience was similarly shown to the head of the village or tribe who gradually acquired the status of a chief or king. The powers of the king gradually increased as the states become larger.

Functions and duties of the King

- To offer protection to the subjects against cattle lifters as social position of a man in Rig-Veda was judged by the number of cows he possessed.
- To fight battles in order to repulse external attacks.
- Protection of private property. So great was this responsibility that the king was to restore to the subject the stolen wealth at any cost.
- Preservation of family and prevention of adultery.
- As time passed the concept of welfare state developed and development of agriculture, trade and commerce, promotion of industries, etc. were other responsibilities which the king carried on his shoulders. His other functions included removal of poverty and misery of his subjects and to support the helpless, aged, blind, cripple, orphans and widows.

Ceremonies associated with Kingship

Ashvamedha Parva of *Mahabharatha* mentions that consecration (Rajyabhisheka) was often followed by a digvijaya (conquest) wherein the king sent his army to make sure of his sovereignty over the surrounding areas. This digvijaya was followed by a fresh consecration, a grand royal sacrifice, attended by many kings and marked an exchange of costly presents

and by lavish gifts to priests and others. Sometimes at the time of his own consecration, a king would consecrate his son or brother as Yuvaraja. For instance Yudhishtara appointed his brother Bhima to that office. A king at each stage of the elevation of his power and status used to perform a ceremony prescribed for the purpose. According to the *Gopatha Brahmana*, one becomes a Raja by performing Rajasuya, Samrat by performing the Vajapeya, Svarat by performing Ashwamedha and Virat by performing Purushamedha. The performance of these ceremonies gave a sacred character to the kingship.

Rajasuya: The Rajasuya ceremony consisted of the performance of a series of rituals like Agnistoma, Panchavattiya, Indraturiya, Apamarga homa, Abhishekaniya and others. The whole process took two years and three months and only a consecrated Kshatriya was eligible to celebrate it. According to *Mahabharatha*, the Rajasuya was performed by very powerful kings after they had completed a digvijaya. But during the Vedic period even petty kings used to perform this ceremony.

Vajapeya: The Vajapeya ceremony was at first of lessor political importance than Rajasuya and could be performed by the Brahmin, Kshatriya as well as Vaishya. But later it was accorded a higher status as the Taittiriya texts says that Vajapeya confers imperial positions while Rajasuya only a royal dignity. Hence Vajapeya was performed after Rajasuya ceremony. Like the Rajasuya the Vajapeya ceremony also consisted of performance of rituals like Agnistoma, offering of animals in sacrifice and a chariot race wherein the patron of the ceremony competes with 16 friendly rivals. After winning the race he is enthroned.

Ashwamedha: The performer of this ceremony was a very powerful Kshatriya king as the main object of this sacrifice was to assert one's political supremacy. But this ceremony was also undertaken to achieve wealth, strength, male progeny and freedom from sins. The duration of this ceremony was one year and fifteen days. In this ceremony a horse was let loose and followed by 400 armed men who included princes and chiefs. Normally the horse is let to roam within the territory of the patron as the entry of the horse upon a foreign territory was considered as a challenge to its ruler, resulting in war. This ceremony was also accompanied by other rituals and sacrifices. When the horse returned unmolested, a grand assembly was held by the king, attended by his chiefs and in their presence the ceremonial horse was sacrificed.

Constitutional Monarchy

The doctrine of divinity of the king was not known in the Vedic period. The people had a considerable share in the election of their king. Monarchy was almost elective in the Vedic period with heads of Kulas (tribes) having a voice in the election of the king. Even when the institution of a hereditary monarchy became fully established, the people had a right to be consulted and to set aside the inefficient successor in favour of one more capable. For instance, Dhritarashtra was set aside because he was blind. While popular assemblies like Sabha and Samithi functioned as a constitutional check upon the king, the religious and spiritual sanctions acted as a check against royal tyranny. Kautilya says "A king has no personal likes; it is the likes of the subjects that should be followed by him". In fact the king was considered as the servant of the public and a Dharmashastra writer even fixed his salary as 16% of the revenue collected by the kingdom. The treasury was a public trust to be utilized for public purpose.

It was obligatory for monarchs to invoke assemblies on all important occasions and to place their views before them. For instance king Dasharatha of Ayodhya summoned a conference when he wanted to retire. Even the autocratic Ravana had to call a conference of Rakshasas when he wanted to declare war with Rama. Public opinion was a powerful force in those days. Lord Rama was compelled to banish his beloved wife Seetha under the pressure of public opinion.

According to Prof. Kanakasabhai in the kingdoms of Chera, Chola and Pandya in South India, there was hereditary monarch along with five great assemblies consisting of representatives of the people, priests, physicians, astrologers and ministers respectively. Along with the monarch these assemblies wielded the sovereign powers and safeguarded the rights and privileges of the people.

In ancient India people had the right to overthrow a king if his rule was tyrannical. The *Mahabharata* asks the people to destroy the king who is either wicked or incapable. Smirti writers recommended that subjects should threaten the tyrant that they would migrate from the country and go to another better governed place. It was hoped that the loss of revenue would bring sense upon the king. If even this did not produce result, the subjects were to dethrone the king. For instance the wicked king Vena of the Vairaja dynasty was killed and Trishanku of the solar dynasty was dethroned and banished.

Council of Ministers

The Ministerial Council was the chief administrative authority in the kingdom. The king was supposed not to do anything without the consent of the council. Ministry has been regarded by the ancient Indian political thinkers as a very vital organ of the body called politic. Only men who possessed wisdom, purity of purpose, bravery and loyalty were appointed as ministers. These ministers were no yes-men but known for their integrity, leadership qualities and concern for the welfare of the kingdom. For instance Ashoka's extravagant charity was curbed by his minister. During the time of emergencies they played an important role in the selection of the king. After the death of Rajyavardhana, the Prime Minister Bhandi in consultation with other officials made Harshavardhana as the king of Thaneshvar.

Ratnins: During the early Vedic period the king was assisted by the Purohit (royal priest), Senani (commander of the army) and the Gramani (village chief). At a later period we find reference in Samhitas of the Yajurveda and the Brahmana literature to high functionaries known as Ratnins (jewels), who probably formed the king's council. These Ratnins consisted of Purohit (priest), Mahisi (queen), Suta (chronicler), Gramani (head of the village), Senani (general), Kshattri (chamberlain), Samgrahitri (master of treasury), Bhagadugha (collector of revenue), Aksavapa (superintendent of gambling), Govikartana (king's companion in the chase) and Palagala (courier). The Ratnins took an important part in the consecration ceremony of the king. It was before them that the king took his coronation oath administered to him by the priest

Thirthas: In *Mahabharatha* we have reference to the 18 thirthas who were officials assisting the king in the administration of the state. These officials were- Mantri- councilor, Purohit- priest, Yuvaraja- crown prince, Camupati- commander-in-chief of the army, Dvarapala- chamberlain, Antarveshika- superintendent of the ladies apartments, Karagaradhikari- overseer of prisons, Dravyasamcayakrt- steward, Krtyakrtyesvarthanamviniyojaka- in-charge of treasury, Pradestr- an officer combing both executive and judicial powers, Nagaradhyaksa- overseer of the city, Karyanirmanakrt- engineer, Dharmadhyaksha- judge, Sabhadhyaksha- overseer of the assembly, Dandapala- guardian of punishment, Durgapala, overseer of forts, Rashtrantapala- protector of the frontiers and Atavipala- guardian of the forests.

Arthashastra, a Manual for Administrators

With the establishment of the Mauryan rule, a systematic administrative set-up came into vogue in India. Kautilya or Chanukya, the Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya wrote

the *Arthashastra* incorporating the teachings of earlier works on polity and administration. The *Arthashastra* contains instructions on matters of statecraft and was used as a manual by kings of successive generations all over India to administer their domains. During the Mauryan period the council of ministers was called Parishad. There were two types of ministers-

- **Mantris** – Who were councilors to the king and supervised the working of the Amatyas and
- **Amatyas**– Who were in charge of actual administration (executive officers).

The size of the council (mantri parishad) varied. According to Brihaspati it should be 16, while Usanas mention it as 20 and Manu as 12. Chanukya felt it should depend upon the needs of the state. Scope of work of the Ministry included the whole administration; to enunciate new policies, to ensure their successful working, to remove any difficulties which may crop up, to supervise and direct the state policy regarding taxation and expenditure, direct foreign policy, etc.

The Secretariat

For the conduct of state business, a highly organized Secretariat with 30 departments was established. These departments dealt with all the activities of a modern government such as education, medical relief, revenue, irrigation, commerce, forests, agriculture, audit and accounts, etc. and were in charge of a Superintendent known as Adhyaksha. The works of these departments were supervised by the Amatyas.

Hindu Ideal of Kingship

Hindu kingship was the highest ideal of sacrifice on the part of the individual whose privilege it was to be the king of the Hindus. The time-table to be followed by the king as given by Kautilya allows him just four and a half hours of sleep and three hours for eating and recreation; the rest of the hours devoted to the administration of the state. So as to ably shoulder this responsibility the king was instructed in the four branches of knowledge, namely Anviksiki (philosophy), Trayi (the three Vedas), Varta (economics) and Dandanithi (science of governance). The king was also to practice self-control and conquer lust, anger, greed and pride. He was to shun hunting, gambling, intoxicating drinks and women. Hindu

kings held their kingdom not as personal property but as sacred trust. A classic example for this ideal was Rana Sangram Singh, the Sisodia ruler of Mewar. Once he offered to step down from his throne giving an analogy as how like a broken idol which is considered unfit for worship, he has become unfit to rule after having lost one of his arms, eye and getting one of his legs maimed. But the nobles and other officers dissuaded him from relinquishing the throne saying that his physical disabilities were the result of the injuries received in the battlefield, where he had by heroism and valour, defeated the enemy and won victory for Mewar. Therefore they said that he was the fittest person to enhance the glory of that exalted throne. Hence the *Mahabharatha* says that of all dharmas (duties), rulership is the highest in society for all times.