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Political Science: Nature and Scope

Nature

Politics according to Aristotle and other thinkers is as old as human civilization and its importance could be gauged from the fact that it touches every aspect of human life, be it economy, culture, social relations or ethical norms. Therefore, one pertinent question which comes to mind is what does politics mean and what comprise its nature and scope. The following sections deal with these queries.

The meaning of politics has varied with time and place. While in Greece and India it was associated with ethics, and conceived in theological terms during the medieval ages it was Machiavelli in the west and Kautilya in India who gave realistic orientation to politics. The word ‘politics’ is derived from the Greek word ‘polis’ which means the state and therefore the term ‘political’ refers to anything related with state. Political Science, is therefore, defined as the science of the state encompassing the government and organisation and theory and practise of the state¹. This is a traditional view of Political Science supported by thinkers like R G Gettel, J W Garner, Bluntschli, Paul Janet, George Catlin, Hans Eulan and many others. However this is a very narrow definition of Political Science as within the state there are other institutions and organisations like NGO’s and trade Unions which though informal have bearings on public policies and individual lives. Thus modern political thinkers like Laswell and Robert Dahl have defined politics in terms of power, authority and influence. Laswell and Kaplan have therefore defined Political Science as the “study of shaping and sharing of power”² which has shifted the focus from the mere study of structures and institutions to the study of actions and processes. A more recent

¹ Ray Amal and Bhattacharya Mohit (1999) in Political Theory: Ideas and Institutions, The World Press Private Ltd. Calcutta.

² Laswell D Harold and Kaplan Abraham (1950) in Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry, Yale University Press.

definition of Political Science by Miller and Peter B Haris has defined it as the study of conflict resolution. According to Haris, “the modern emphasis in the study of politics is laid on disagreements and reconciliation or resolution of these disagreements”³. From the above discussion it could be culled out that the definition of Political Science has changed according to the changed circumstances and the changing perception of the scholars of the discipline. Roughly speaking these definitions could be grouped into traditional and modern approaches to political science. While traditional approach has defined political science as the study of state, government and formal institutions laying emphasis on the study of formal legal structures and theoretical part, the modern approach has emphasised on the study of what is actually happening in the state; various forces, processes and informal structures operating within the state.

Another debate which has dominated the modern approach to political science has been as to whether political science could be placed under the ambit of pure science? With the rise of Political Science as a distinct discipline, Political Theory was made one of its subfields. Political Science is concerned with describing and explaining the realities of political behaviour, generalisations about men and political institutions on empirical evidence and the role of power in the society. Political theory, on the other hand, is not only concerned with the behavioural study of political phenomena empirically but also prescribes the goals which states, governments, societies, and citizens ought to pursue. Therefore it is being questioned as to whether the discipline of political science could be described as pure science and various explanations have been put both for and against it.

Unlike natural science, political science lacks consensus among scholars regarding its definition, nature and terminology. Also its principles can't be allied universally as they lack precision and clarity like the principles of natural science where two plus two is always equal to four. This is because political science deals with human beings whose actions are unpredictable and not liable to laboratory experimentation. Therefore a middle approach in political science emerged in the form of post-behaviouralism and political science came to be regarded as both science

and art. Robert Dahl states, “political science is both science and art. Whenever students of political science test their theories against the data of experience by observation, the political analysis can be regarded as scientific. When this political analysis is applied for the working of political institution it is art⁴”.

Scope

The scope of political science refers to its subject matter. There has been tremendous increase in the number of issues which is now being analysed under the realm of Political Science. There are discussions on the theories of state origin, sovereignty, law, liberty, rights, forms and organs of government, representation, state functions, political parties, pressure groups, public opinion, and ideologies such as capitalism, socialism, communism etc., international relations and institutions⁵.

The international Political Science Association meet in Paris in 1948 classified the scope of Political Science into four zones: political theory, political institution, political dynamics and international relations⁶. Political theory deals with the fundamental concepts of political science like state, government, justice, liberty, equality, law, sovereignty, separation of power, modes of representation, forms of government, grounds of political obligation and various ideologies. Political philosophy takes a theoretical and speculative overview of these fundamental concepts. Political institution is concerned with the study of formal political institutions like the state and the government, the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, the electorate and the administration. Political dynamics refers to the forces and processes which operate within the government and politics such as political parties, pressure groups, interest groups, lobbies, public opinion, propaganda etc.

Apart from these four zones political science also deals with three other areas which are public administration, international relations and international law and relations between the state and the individual. Public administration deals with the organization, control and coordination of administrative machinery, personnel administration, financial administration, public relations, management, administrative

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⁵ Ray and Bhattacharya.....

⁶ Samir, URL:

law and adjudication etc⁷. It also covers the study of local self-governing institutions like corporations, municipalities and Panchayati Raj institutions.

Conclusion

Therefore, broadly speaking Political Science deals with two sorts of topics, one which is based on empirical facts and the other which is value based. There has been a long tradition in Political Science of dealing with value based issues or things as they ought to be based on the preferences of individual philosophers. Based on value preferences, philosophers have sought to make generalisations regarding state, government as well as the structures and processes associated with them. However such generalisations aren't being made without any consideration to the political realities. Therefore it would be wrong to say that all traditionalists have ignored empirical facts at the altar of value orientations. The fact is that it was only after industrialisation and behavioural revolution that empirical methods came to occupy centre-stage in Political Science. The primary focus here is on the actual nature, structure and working of the political systems so as to derive factual propositions and generalisations.

However both traditional and empirical methods have their limitations. Therefore a third kind of approach which is basically a combination of the traditional and empirical approach have emerged which is basically prescriptive in nature and seeks to bridge the gap between what is and what ought to be⁸. For example, proposals for political reform such as anti-defection measures and prescriptions for improving the political system like parliamentary versus presidential form of government are generally based on normative considerations. At the same time these also involve examination and evaluation of factual data. Discussions with such an evaluative overtone can be called as prescriptive⁹. All the above discussions together constitute the scope of political science.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ray and Bhattacharya.....

⁹ Ibid.