THE MAURYAN STATE: A POLITICAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT
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The topic of my research work is *The Mauryan State: A Political Theory Perspective*. The research work deals with ancient India in general and the Mauryan era in particular. The present research is an attempt to explore the relevance of the past to the present. It analyzes some of the problems faced by the modern Indian state in the light of its ancient past particularly the Mauryan era.

The central hypothesis of my research is that the Mauryan state carries significant lessons for the present Indian state with respect to three problems:

1. The problem of national integration
2. The problem of federal autonomy and
3. The problem of personality-institution dichotomy.

We know that the Mauryas were the first dynasty to establish a pan-Indian empire. They were facing many problems some of which are still faced by the developing countries and particularly by the Indian state. There are a number of similarities between the past and the present. Looking at these similarities a question naturally comes before us of whether we can explore our past for providing solutions to our present day problems? The question becomes more complex due to the fact that there is a great difference between the socio-economic and cultural environment of the present and the past. Besides, it is said that the concepts like nationalism, federalism and multiculturalism are modern day phenomena and there was no adequate conceptualisation and theorisation in ancient India on these issues. Therefore, to critically examine the relevance of the past to the present has been the main concern of my research work. In my research work I have taken three such problems.

The first is the problem of national integration. Almost all developing countries including India are facing the problem of integration of people of different religions, races, castes, regions and ethnicities into the mainstream of national life. They look at the West for a conceptual framework of nation building. The Western concept of nation state which is often called the child of the French Revolution is based on the ideal of “one nation one state”. The doctrine of national self-determination provides a theoretical base for it. But this concept of one nation one state is not applicable to the third world countries or post-colonial states like India because they consist of people speaking many languages, practising different religions and having different customs and cultures. In short, these states consist of
multicultural nationalities and identities. Therefore, it is said that the basis of nation building in these states should be such as could recognise the composite culture of these nations.

In ancient India also we find such diversity and at the same time we see attempts to create unity out of this diversity. At a metaphysical level there have been long-ranging ontological discussions regarding the nature of Reality, and the consensus which was set out in the Upanishadas was that while there was a single Reality behind all the multiplicity, this Reality or Unity could manifest itself in multiple ways. This belief led to the concept of the trinity of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Mahesh, each of which represented specific aspects of truth, yet each was complete in itself. This concept of polytheistic monism had important cultural consequences: it was not necessary to obliterate the existing religious ideas and beliefs of different peoples who were conquered by the ruling elites, but to give almost equal respect to all religious sects and beliefs.

The second problem which has been dealt in the present research work is the problem of federal autonomy. The nature of the present Indian state is that of a centralised federalism often described by critics as “quasi-federal”, “noticeably centripetal” or “vertical federation”. It contains both federal and unitary features. Though the founding fathers of the Constitution tried to make a thin balance between the unity and integrity of the nation on the one hand and autonomy of the regions on the other hand, the operational aspect of federalism has not been satisfactory. In many areas like in the North-Eastern regions of India separatist movements emerged. Similarly, Punjab remained disturbed for quite a long period and our Southern states like Tamil Nadu quite often complain of the cultural hegemony of the Hindi speaking Northern India over other parts of the country. Some of these regions went to the extent of waging a war of secession from the Indian state.

If we look at the Mauryan state in particular, there also we find both the forces of integration and disintegration operating together. The Mauryan state was definitely centralised at the core, but the peripheral areas enjoyed a sufficient amount of autonomy. The empire was divided into provinces and the rulers of the provinces had enough autonomy though the broader policy framework was decided by the Central government. The provincial rulers accepted the sovereignty of the emperor ruling at the Centre. There were officers like Samāharta (the chief revenue assessor and collector) who controlled the overall revenue collection of the empire. This suggests that the higher officers came from the metropolitan state or the core regions. But the actual collectors at the level of village and town might have
been local appointees. Due to topographical factors communication was very difficult in ancient India. It was much slower during the monsoons. Therefore, the Central government was not in a position to always effectively force the provinces to act according to its own will. We also find the reference of revolt by the provincial governors against Central rule and sometimes it resulted in the decentralisation or even complete autonomy from the Centre. Due to a vast distance between Pataliputra, the capital city and the remote border areas and also underdeveloped means of communication, it was very difficult for the Central government to exercise full and effective control over the provinces. Thus, one must a priori assume the existence of local representatives of the king, who had at their disposal a large amount of power.

The third research problem is related to the conflict between the personality and the institution or in other words between personalised politics and institutionalised politics. In most of the developing countries nationalism is the legacy of anti-colonial or anti-imperialist struggle. Sometimes third world nationalism is called elitist nationalism because it did not emerge from the bottom but started at the top. It is negative in the sense that its main goal was to overthrow alien rule and get national independence. In the post-independence era this phenomenon usually led to the emergence of a charismatic leader which overshadowed all aspects of national political life. This leader in the post-independence era due to his overarching personality overshadowed all aspects of national life. This created order, stability and discipline and respect for authority in these newly independent states but at the same time whether knowingly or unknowingly it inhibited the development of institutions. This dichotomy between personality and institution was responsible for the rise and growth of personalised politics instead of institutionalised politics.

If we revisit the Mauryan polity we find a similar trend of development of personality politics particularly during the reign of Ashoka. By formulating the policy of Dhamma Ashoka tried to establish a patrimonial relationship with his subjects. He declared that ‘all men are my children’. He was available for his subjects even at his private residence. If we look at the inscriptions of Ashoka, it becomes quite obvious that the emperor most of the time tried to directly address the people through his edicts. All his declarations were the declarations of an emperor who wanted to make direct contact with his subjects. The widespread presence of his inscriptions suggests that they were spread throughout the empire from North to South. Thus even at those remote places where he could not interact with his subjects directly and frequently, he tried to do this through his inscriptions. At every
important occasion and social gathering these inscriptions were read out to the public. In this way he sidelined the mediating links and institutions which came between him and his subjects. This system might have positive implications from the perspective of making the administration sensitive to the needs of the people but in the long run it resulted in the weakening of the institutions. Personality of the monarch became so dense and influential that it overshadowed institutions. In his edicts Ashoka used the title devānāmpiya meaning beloved of the Gods. This declaration of the monarch being the representative and grace holder of God also helped to intensify the importance of the personality of the ruler over that of the institutions.

In the light of these three problems the present research work seeks to analyze that can we look into the Mauryan era for getting solution to these problems?

After making a thorough analysis of the past and the present research leads us to the conclusion that the past does not carry explicit lessons for the present. Though the past gives some principles to illuminate the present it cannot be used as a foundation for the present. Therefore, the Mauryan state cannot be more than a limited source of lessons for the present Indian state though it has some similarities with it. They differ in fundamental ways. The Mauryas had established an empire whereas the present Indian state is a nation state. Nation state and empire differ in various ways and therefore what was applicable and suitable to the Mauryan empire may not be applicable and suitable to the present Indian state.