

What is Political Theory and what is its Relevance?

Paper Title: Introduction to Political Theory

**Lesson: What is Political Theory and what is its
Relevance?**

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What is Political Theory and what is its Relevance?

Introduction

Catriona Mckinnon believes that Political theory is the study to understand the questions like how we should live together in society. For him there are various aspects to social life and social cooperation, and many dimensions to political theory (McKinnon: 2008 : 2). Political theory urges to understand, explain and analyze the political phenomena and suggesting ways and means to rectify the shortcomings. From empirical point of view political theory is not only concerned with the behavioural study of the political phenomena but also prescribing the goals which states, governments, societies and citizens, ought to pursue. The objective of Political theory is to generalize about the good conduct in the political life and about the legitimate use of power. Political theory is neither pure thought nor philosophy, nor science, while it draws heavily from all of them, yet it distinct from them.

Political theory also related with the analytical study of ideas and doctrines that have been central to political thought. As it studies the ends and means of political action, political theory is concerned with ethical or normative questions, related to issues such as justice, freedom, equality and so on (Heywood:2000:98-99).

Meaning, Definition, Characteristics

The word 'Political' has multiple meanings. It derived from the Greek word '*polis*'. It meant city-state, presently it means the state. More specifically, it refers to decision-making within and about the community. To be political, to live in the polis, as Hannah Arendt tells us, means that everything is to be decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. Meaning of the term 'political' can be understood through the following points : (a) The collective power to take decisions about every aspect of the good life in the community. (b) The power of some groups to control or subordinate others in order to realize not the good of the entire community but their own narrow interests. Here, the term 'political' is used to relate power and self-interest. (c) The state power used to realize the common good or values. (d) The state power used to exercise domination by one group over

others. Thus, today we used the term 'political' in each of the above points and as both an empirical and normative concept (Bhargava and Acharya : 2008 : 14-16).

The word 'theory' has been derived from the Greek word '*theoria*'. It means a well focused mental outlook taken at something in a settle of contemplation with the intent to grasp it. It is generally considered as a separate branch of political science which attempts to arrive at generalizations and draws inferences or conclusions from the data gathered by various specialists relating to political phenomena. As a term 'political theory' has been defined in both "a broad" and "a narrow" sense.

Sebina defines it, "as anything about politics or relevant to politics". That is his broad definition of political theory. He also has given the narrow definition as "the disciplined investigation of political problems".



David Held (born 1951) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Held)

David Held defined that "political theories are complex network of concepts and generalizations about political life involving ideas, assumptions on statements about the nature, purpose and key features of governments, state and society, and about the political capabilities of human beings". **Andrew Hacker** said, "It is a combination of a disinterested search for the principles of good state and good society on the one hand, and a disinterested search for knowledge of political and social reality." **John Plamentaz** defines political theory in functional terms and says

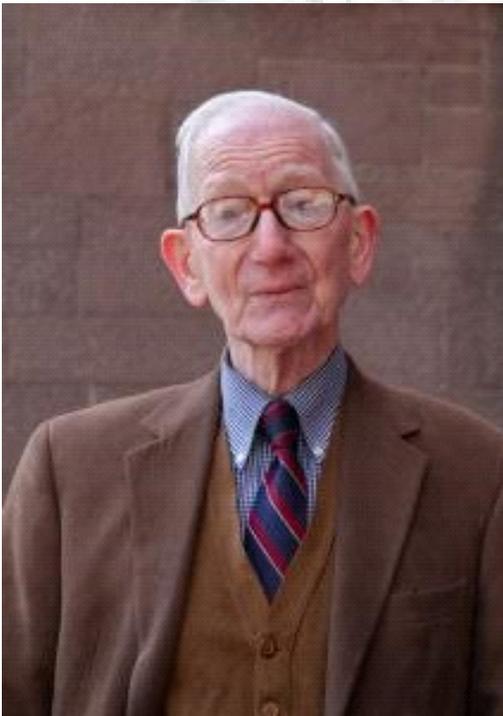
: "The function of political theory has come to be restricted to the analysis and clarification of the vocabulary of politics and the critical examination, verification and justification of the concepts employed in political arguments". **Norman Berry** defines that "political theory is an electric subject which draws upon a variety of disciplines. There is nobody of knowledge or method of analysis which can be classified as belonging exclusively to political theory" (Mohanty : 2010 : 43-44).

The above definitions bring out certain essential characteristics of political theory which are as follows :

- (a) Political theory has as its area of operation, the realm of politics. It includes citizen's political life, political behaviour, political ideas, the governments he establishes and the task that government performs.
- (b) The methods which political theory applies, includes description, explanation, prediction and investigation of any political phenomenon chiefly with intent to grasp or comprehend all about what is 'political'.
- (c) The ultimate objective of political theory is to construct a better state in a good society. In the process it also attempts to create certain processes, procedures, structures and institutions, which historically tested and rationally attuned.
- (d) As a systematized body of thought, political theory is about to explain, evaluate and predict political phenomena. In the process political theory also builds scientifically testable models as well as values as rules of human conduct.
- (e) The functions of political theory are prescriptive and explanatory. It is a description of what the 'political order' is about and it is also a symbolic representation of what is 'political'.
- (f) As the systematic and analytical study of the processes and consequences of political activity, it is both analytical expository, and explanatory. Thus, political theory seek to give order, clarity and meaning to understand what is described as 'political' (Gandhi : 2007 : 22-23).

NATURE OF POLITICAL THEORY

Political theory is closely related to the nature of state, the authority, the structure of the state, the interaction of the state with its environment. Political theory also relates with the works of political thinkers. But, this tends political theory to mean more of political thought. Some equate political theory with political science and political philosophy. Dwelling on the nature of political theory, **George Catlin** significantly observed : "The theory (of politics) itself is divided into political science and political philosophy.



Andrew Hacker (1929-)(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Hacker)

" **Andrew Hacker** also dwells on these two major components of political theory. He writes : "Every political scientist ... plays a double role. He is part scientist and part philosopher ... no theorist can make a lasting contribution to human knowledge unless he works in the realms of both science and philosophy" (Gaubha : 2008 : 25).

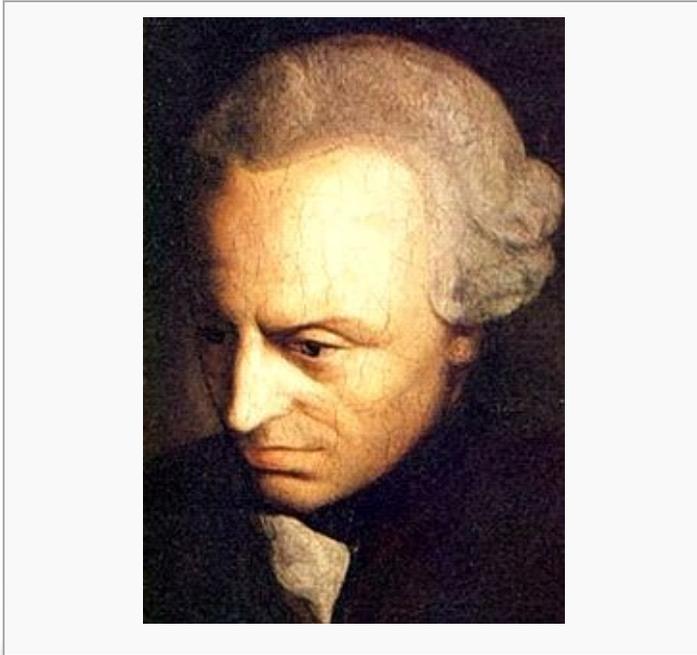
Nature of Political Science

The nature of Political science relates to the study of politics by the use of scientific methods in contrast to political philosophy which is free to use non-scientific methods. The study of political science is concerned with explaining and describing the realities of political behaviour, generalizations about man and political institutions through empirical evidence, and the role of power in the society. In consonance with the requirements of scientific method political science proceeds by following steps : (a) **Observation** which relies on sense experience along and rules out supernatural or metaphysical causation. (b) **Generalization** which is based on observation of regularities leading to establishing the relation and correlation between different factors or variables. This may either be obtained by the inductive or deductive methods. Generalization must be expressed in the form of a general rule, preferably in quantitative terms, which should be capable of verification by experimentation. (c) **Explanation** which consists in giving reasons for the general rule, for without such reasoning any observation of correlation might be a mere coincidence, explanation alone will make particular events, situations or tendencies meaningful; and finally (d) **Prediction** and **Prescription** so that in the light of known facts and general rules, their possible outcome could be known as measures for achieving such objectives as higher efficiency, stability, satisfaction, etc. could be suggested (Gauga : 2008:25).

Nature of Political Philosophy

Political Philosophy deals not only with matters of fact but also with matters of norms. According to this viewpoint, political science inquires into what men and women actually do in a political situation while political philosophy tries to determine what they ought to do in keeping with the ultimate good or purpose of human life. But this view does not define the scope of political philosophy adequately. As far as scope is concerned; political philosophy is characterized by the construction of comprehensive theories of politics. A political scientist is primarily interested in the study of concrete phenomena that occur in human society, and if he takes interest in political philosophy, it also know the 'how' and 'why' of political phenomena and the 'how' and 'why' of normative evaluation of these phenomena. Plato and Aristotle are important not because they are great as writers, but because a great deal of what they have written is still relevant, valid and highly significant for the study of political phenomena (Verma : 1975:105-6). Political theory depends on political philosophy in many respects. For political philosophy, as the sum-total of general laws (morals,

norms, values, end and purposes) has contributed political theory well through the ages.



Immanuel Kant(1724-1804) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant)

As **Kant** observes, has answered three question about political philosophy : 'What can I know?'(i.e. consciousness) 'What must I do?' (i.e. action) 'What can I hope for?' (i.e. aspiration). This is what the philosophy a way of life becomes. No political theory can ever hope, without philosophy, to exist as it sets directions, goals to be accomplished (Gandhi : 2007: 24-25). According to Haywood, "Political philosophy's central questions have included 'Why should I obey the state?', 'Who should rule?' 'How should rewards be distributed?' and 'What should be the limits of individual freedom? Academic political philosophy concerned with the critical evaluation of political beliefs, and it attempts to clarify and refine the concepts employed in political discourse. Political philosophy is therefore distinct from political science" (Haywood : 2000 : 95). As for example, political philosophy is abstract or speculative study, while political theory can be the study of both normative and empirical.

Arnold Brecht



Arnold Brecht (1884-1977) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Brecht)

Arnold Brecht said that “explanations through philosophical methods are theories too, but they are called non-scientific. Thus, political theory is neither pure thought, nor philosophy, nor science. While it draws heavily from all of them, yet it has some distinction from them. Therefore contemporary political theory is trying to attempt a synthesis between political philosophy and political science” (Vermani : 2011 : 5-6).

POLITICAL THEORY : ITS GROWTH AND VARIOUS STREAMS/ SCHOOLS

During its history of more than 2500 years various traditions and streams have been developed. All the streams have their own specific features. We shall now discuss some major schools of political thought which have shaped in the development of various concepts of political theory. These are as follows :

Classical Political Theory

Classical political theory starts from the 6th Century B.C. It explains the political ideas of a large number of philosophers from Greek, Roman and Christian thinkers. Plato and Aristotle are the two great philosophers of the classical period. Classical ideas of political theory included politics, the idea of theory, and the practice of philosophy. Classical Philosophers seems politics as the participation in the public affairs. They believe that theory referred to the systematic knowledge through the methods of observation, while philosophy referred to the quest for the reliable knowledge. The nature of classical political theory included description,

explanation, prescription and evaluation. The classical theory believed in ultimate good as well as in political good. The classical political theorist believed that state as a natural institution and prior to the individual and common good. Classical theorist repeated asked questions like – who should rule and why? What is the best form of the government?

Liberal Political Theory

From 15th Century onwards, the twin revolutions of Renaissance and Reformation in the Europe, developed the new intellectual atmosphere which resulted the birth of modern science and modern philosophy and a new political theory known as liberalism. The liberal political theory found classical expression in the writings of Grotious, Hobbes, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and others (Vermani : 2011:12). The central theme of liberal political theory was individualism. It puts more emphasis on autonomy of individual will. The liberal theory believes that the state is not a natural institution, as the Greek philosophers were stated, but the state comes into existence by mutual consent, through the process of social contract for the purpose to preserve and protect individual rights. The theory does not believe the idea of common good and focused an organic self- interested community. The theory also gave the idea that the best government is who governs the least, because maximum functions of the state can be harmful for the individual freedom.

Marxist Political Theory

Karl Marx, Engles and their followers was challenged Liberal individualistic political theory in the later half of the nineteenth century. Theory according to Marx is the hand-maiden of practical material interests. Communist theory of Marx is not mere description or explanation of the realities of human life and society, or even prediction of what is to come, but the necessary weapon for the demolition of class society and a blueprint for establishing a new world, based on the knowledge that man can create himself. Marx believed in the unity of theory and practice as he pointed that 'it is consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness'. It is the material societal development which has created the false distinction between theory and practice, spirit and matter, this-worldly and other – worldly existence (Varma: 1975: 83). Marxism introduced a new concept of philosophy conceived as a way to the liberation of mankind. Marxist theory opposed liberal-capitalism on the ground that the idea of this theory about property, equality,

freedom and family fortune benefited only for have classes and becomes a most degrading condition for the vast number of have-not classes. Marxism believes that the abolishment of capitalism through the mass revolution and establishment of socialism will change the society and makes a real freedom for all, as the emancipation of mankind. The central theme of Marxist political theory are state as an instrument of class domination, mode of production, class division, property relations and revolution. Marxism as the economic, social and political theory and practice has been enriched not only the works of Marx and Engles, but also, by number of, philosophers, revolutionaries, academicians and politicians. The prominent contributions to the Marxist thought in the twentieth century were Lenin, Bukanin, Stalin, Rose Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lukas, Austro-Marxists, the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, the New Left theorist, Euro-communist, Mao Tse Tung and others. From the Russian revolution during the first world war, Marxism as a theory was represented a philosophy of socio-political changes however, since second world-war, Marxism developed more as a critique of present socio-economic and cultural conditions than a philosophy of revolutionary action (Vermani : 2011: 13-14).

Empirical-Scientific Political Theory

Empirical scientific political theory was developed in America during the decade of 1920s. This school of theory based upon facts, rather than values and studies politics through scientific method instead of normative method. Max Weber, Graham Wallas and Arthur Bentley studied political theory by the empirical-scientific methods and advocates that the study of political theory should be based upon only 'facts'. George Catlin emphasized inter-disciplinary study of political theory meaning that the political science should be integrated with other social sciences such as Economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology etc. After the second world-war the Chicago School developed behavioural theory. Charles Merriam, Harold Laswell, Gosnell, David Easton, V.O. Key and David Apter were the chief exponent of this theory. Behavioural theory emphasis the study of politics through political ideals, values and institutions in the context of individual and group behaviour (Vermani : 2011 : 14-15).

The characteristics of empirical scientific political theory are : (i) It believe to maintain order, explanation and predicts the phenomenon but not evaluate it by

settling the utopian standard. (ii) The theory free itself from values and centers around facts. (iii) This theory is different from the classical political theory in a sense, that it is not concerned with the study of institutional framework. (iv) Does not believe in the critical function, (v) It also influenced by biological views and introduces the concepts like system, structure, function, decision-making and policy-making. However, empirical-scientific theory has attracted criticism because of its claim of complete value free judgment, its failure to study the present social, political issues. The debate in 1970's resulted in reaching the conclusion that the values, purposes, missions, visions should be related with the political structure. The core issues of political theory like liberty, equality, justice are taken up by the post-behavioural school as well by political scientist like John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Habermas and many others (Gandhi : 2007 : 32-33).

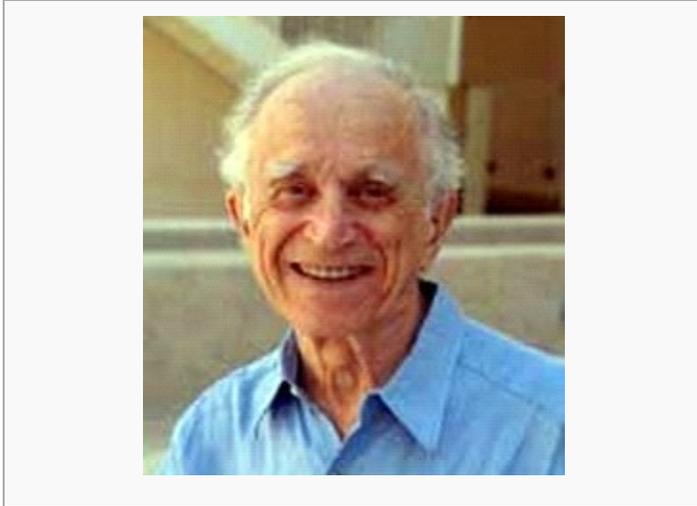
Contemporary Political theory

The two much emphasis on facts, pure sciences by the empiricist school and its failure to understand the present socio-political reality gives shape to the contemporary political theory. Since 1970s the dominating era of behavioural political theory is now to be seen overpowered by scientific theory which derives its legitimate status through scientific enquiry and knowledge. But the mixing of social facts and understanding to the social facts with the help of natural sciences cannot last long. The political scientist like Thomas Kuhn challenges the whole model of what is science. Also others are led to believe that understanding social sciences and social issues cannot be studied by a model of unified science. So, it was realized that political theory is more than a philosophy and also more than a science as it has both vision and relevance. According to **David Held** the contemporary political theory has the following characteristics : (i) philosophical, because it is based on normative as well as conceptual framework. (ii) empirical, because it is based on explanation of the concepts. (iii) historical, because it interprets and understand the concept is historical situation/context, and (iv) strategic and future perspective, because it says not only where we are today but also where from we have started and how far we should travel and at what velocity. (Gandhi : 2007 : 33-36).

DEBATE ON THE DECLINE OF POLITICAL THEORY

It was during the 1950-1970 that the debate regarding the decline of political theory was hot. The debate was spread headed by David Easton, A. Cobban, Robert Dahl, P. Laslett and virtually all American so-called political scientists, who had faith

in positivism. It was maintained that political theory based on classics was either declining or was dead or was in a 'dog-house state'. This new American wave rejected both elements of philosophy and history in political theory.



David Easton (born 1917) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Easton)

David Easton in his *Political System : An Enquiry into the State of Political Science* (1953) asserted that the traditional political theory was based on mere speculation. It was devoid of acute observation of the political reality. In order to lay scientific foundations of the study politics, it was necessary to rescue it from the study of classics and the history of political ideas. Similarly, Alfred Cobban in his paper on 'The Decline of Political Theory' published in *Political Science Quarterly* (1953) argued that political theory had lost its significance in capitalist as well as communist systems. Capitalist systems were inspired by the idea of 'libertarian democracy' whereas there was no political theorist of democracy around. It was also characterized by overwhelming role of bureaucracy and the creation of a huge military machine. Political theory had practically to play no role in sustaining this system. Then Seymour Martin Lipset in his *Political Man : The Social basis of Politics* (1960) argued the values of the contemporary society had already been decided. In the United States, the age old search for 'good society' had come to an end because they had already achieves it. It prevailing form of democracy in that country was "the closest approximation to the good society itself in operation" Dante Germino in his *Beyond Ideology : The Revival of Political Theory* (1967) argued that in most of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century there were two major causes of the decline of political theory. (a) the rise of positivism which led to the craze for

science; and (b) the prevalence of political ideologies culminating in Marxism (Gaubert : 2008 : 36-37).

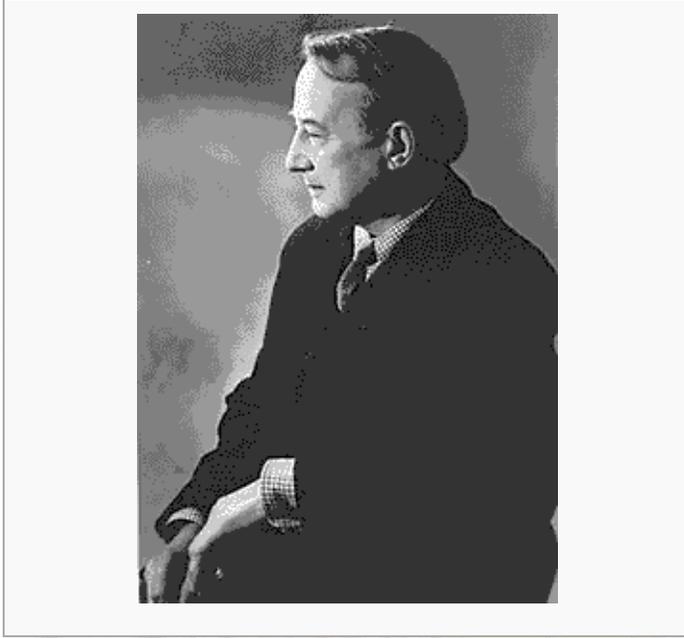
REVIVAL OF POLITICAL THEORY

In the year 1969, while delivering the presidential address of *American Political Science Association*, David Easton raised the issue of relevance, substance and action. It is known as the 'Credo of relevance'. He revised his earlier views on political theory's decline and declared it to be important for political analysis. He also accepted the importance of values in social research. It gave birth to post-behaviouralism in political theory. After 1970 many important works by American and European political theorists revived political theory and claimed that it never declined. John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Leo Strauss, Oakeshott, S. Wolin, Issiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, the Frankfurt school of critical theory helped with their writings to revive the political theory.



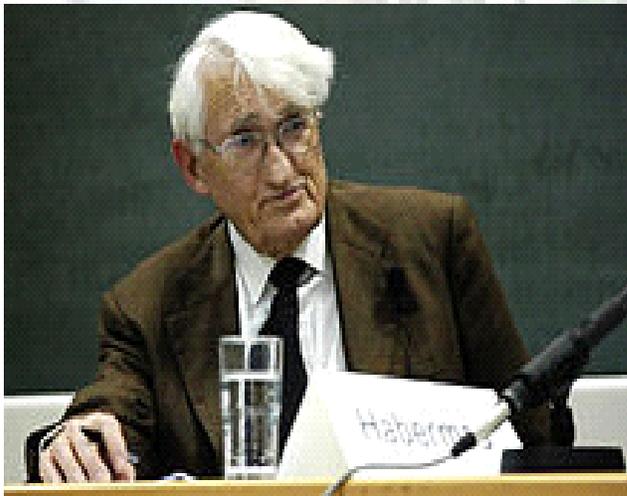
Hannah Arendt (1906-75) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Arendt)

Arendt rejects the idea of hidden and anonymous forces in history. She pointed to the essential incompatibility between ideology and political theory. Oakeshott understands experience to be a concrete whole with different kinds of 'modes'. The modes constitute 'arrests' in experience and the purpose of philosophy is to identify each mode and define its relationship with other aspects of experience. He does not distinguish between subject and object, fact and values. He rejects the contention that philosophy can learn from the methods of science.



Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Oakeshott)

About the significance of classical political theory Leo Strauss seeks it as to remedy the crisis of modern times. He has no support with the idea about that all political theory is ideological in nature mirroring a given socio-economic interest (Strauss : 1959 : 12). Vogelstein believes the inter-dependence between political theory and political science and that one is not possible without the other. The Frankfurt school opposed all forms of positivism and criticized the possibility of a value free social science.



Jürgen Habermas (born June 1929)

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas)

Hebermas theory of *legitimization crisis* assessed advanced capitalism and communicative action. His commitment to the enlightenment philosophy's faith in the power of reason and progress made him a critic of post-modernism (Ramaswami : 2003 : 30-36). In any case since, 1970s the dispute between political science and political philosophy has largely subsided.

RELEVANCE OF POLITICAL THEORY

The relevance of political theory can be well understood from the purpose it serves and the task it performs. Political theory may be seen as a system of values, norms and ideas on forming an organization, social, political, cultural etc. They help us to understand the political reality. It enables us to speculate about the nature of good life, the appropriate political institutions needed to realize it. The relevance of political theory could be tested in relation to (i) a description of the political phenomena (ii) a non-scientific (based on philosophy and religion) speculation or a scientific (based on empirical studies) analysis or explanation (iii) political goals and political action, and (iv) ethico-normative and moral judgment. Essays on political theory propounded in Plato's *Republic*, Issiah Berlin's *Liberty* or Rawls' *A theory of Justice* or Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* can be cited as some example to the relevance of political theory (Gandhi : 2007 : 41-42).

The significance of political of theory lies in evolving various doctrines and approaches regarding the nature and purpose of the state, the basis of political authority, vision of an ideal state, best form of government, relations between the state and the individual and the basic issues such as rights, liberty, equality, property, justice etc. political theory is based upon such generalizations which are made possible to politics through the political thinkers and philosophers. These thinkers presented new kinds of solutions to overcome new problems born out of changing conditions and environments. Therefore, political theory not only presents solutions to resolve the existing problems but also provide estimate of future conditions. Political theory encourages a dignified debate between upholders of different points of view. Most political philosophers form ancient time have been dwelling on some common problems and giving us a new insight. Therefore, it can be understood that political theory generate mutual respect and toleration among us and prompts us to resolve our differences. Political theorist also gives us the clarity about the concept through complete analytical study. Thus, the interpretation and

analysis of theorist provide clarity to political values and ideologies and makes it possible to protect from possible misinterpretation and misrepresentation.

David Held views the task of political theorist as really demanding. He sees a danger that, politics will be left to the ignorant and self seeking whose concern is only pursuing it as power rather than instrument of selfless service. In short the relevance of political theory consist in the following points :

- (i) About the nature and purpose of state, and government relationship of individual, authority and state, political theory provides systematic thinking for these areas.
- (ii) About the socio-political ideals and the socio-political phenomena political theory helps us to establish a correlation between them.
- (ii) It helps us to know the nature and ends of the socio-economic system and the stages of its evolution through the ages.
- (iv) It makes the individual conscious of his rights and duties in a state or a society.
- (v) It helps to find solutions to problems like poverty, violence, corruption, ethnicity, etc.
- (vi) As Karl Marx said, the task of political theory is not only to understand and explain the social reality but also to change it. Viewed in this light, political theory helps us to evolve ways and means to change society either through reform or revolution.
- (vii) If political theory performs its desirable function, then the people will be equipped with the instruments of struggle for their advancement. The correct political theories may make us choose right goals and means so as to avoid the roads that end in darkness of despair (Gandhi : 2007 : 42-43).
- (viii) It tells us about the past, present and future of politics in a rational way.
- (ix) It helps the comparison of different political systems and helps in evacuating our own system.
- (x) It encourages a dignified debate between upholders of different points of view. It is a source of mutual respect and toleration between the political thinkers and academicians.

CONCLUSION

As discussed earlier political theory consists of political science and political philosophy. These two branches of political theory taken together performs three important functions : the explanatory function at the most general level, but more distinctively the contemplative and the normative (Bhargava and Acharya : 2008 : 36). Political science mainly relies on empirical method, which is supposed to be most reliable knowledge. Hence it specialize in 'explanation'. On the other political philosophy being concerned with normative questions and value judgment specialize in 'criticism' and making some 'solution'.

The goal of theory is to enhance our thinking of the social reality and create conditions for good life. In this context, both classical and empirical theories need to be synthesized. Political theory is also important because it can go forward basing itself on the theories and purpose the means and directions for changing society to establish an ideal society. Marxist theory for instance is an example of a theory which not only purposes the direction but also goes so far as to advocate a revolution for establishing an egalitarian state. Thus, the political theory is sound and it can be transmitted and communicated to people than it can become a very powerful force for the advancement of society and mankind.

Glossary:

Behaviouralism/Behavioural School: Behavioralism is an approach in political science, which emerged in the 1930s in the United States. It represents a sharp break from previous political science. This is because it emphasized an objective, quantified approach to explain and predict political behavior. It is associated with the rise of the behavioral sciences, modeled after the natural sciences.

Capitalism: Capitalism is an economic system in which trade, industries, and the means of production are largely or entirely privately owned and operated for profit. Central characteristics of capitalism include private property, capital accumulation, wage labour and, in many models, competitive markets. In a capitalist economy, the parties to a transaction typically determine the prices at which assets, goods, and services are exchanged.

Consciousness: Consciousness is the quality or state of awareness, or, of being aware of an external object or something within oneself. It has been defined as: sentience, awareness, subjectivity, the ability to experience or

to feel, wakefulness, having a sense of selfhood, and the executive control system of the mind.

Description: Description is one of four rhetorical modes (also known as modes of discourse), along with exposition, argumentation, and narration. Each of the rhetorical modes is present in a variety of forms and each has its own purpose and conventions. The act of description may be related to that of definition.

Empirical method: The method of study which focuses on the observation of facts through sense organs, and inquires into their relationship and the laws governing this relationship.

Explanation: An explanation is a set of statements constructed to describe a set of facts which clarifies the causes, context, and consequences of those facts.

Normative method: The method of study which seek to determine as to what ought to do. It is the arena of reflection to our values and ideals.

Positivism: Positivism is the philosophy of science that information derived from logical and mathematical treatments and reports of sensory experience is the exclusive source of all authoritative knowledge, and that there is valid knowledge (truth) only in this derived knowledge. Verified data received from the senses are known as empirical evidence.

Prediction/ Prescription: A prediction is a statement about the way things will happen in the future, often but not always based on experience or knowledge. A prediction may be a statement that some outcome is expected, and may cover a range of possible outcomes. A "prediction" may be contrasted with a "projection", which is explicitly dependent on stated assumptions.

Toleration: Toleration is "the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves. One can meaningfully speak of tolerating—i.e., of allowing or permitting—only if one is in a position to disallow." It has also been defined as "to bear or endure" or "to nourish, sustain or preserve."

Questions:

1. What is meant by Political Theory? Examine Its Significance.
2. Define Political Theory. Discuss its Relevance in the Contemporary World.
3. Explain the Nature of Political Theory.
4. Discuss various schools to the study of Political Theory.

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