



Western Political Thought and political regimes by Plato : A Review

Dr. Umesh Kumar, Research Scholar,

Department of Political Science, Singhania University

Introduction : Plato was an influential philosopher and scholar in political realm who lived between 427 and 347 BC. He was a student of Socrates and later made the first known "university," called the Academy. He has immense contribution in political theories. His best work is The Republic, and his best known concept is the Theory of Forms. The Theory of Forms states that, while experience is changing and illusory, ideal forms are static and real. Plato advanced Parmenides theory that both experience and forms are real. Aristotle and Socrates also began their philosophical thought from Parmenides, who was known as Parmenides of Elea and lived between 510 and 440 BC.

Plato developed such dissimilar areas of philosophy as epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. He had profound influence on Western philosophy. It is affirmed in the famous remark of Alfred North Whitehead: "the safest characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. He was also the ideal political philosopher whose ideas had a thoughtful impact on subsequent political theory. His greatest impact was Aristotle, but he influenced Western political thought in numerous ways. The philosophy of Plato is marked by the usage of dialectic, a method of dialogue involving ever more insightful insights into the nature of reality, and by cognitive optimism, a belief in the capacity of the human mind to attain the truth and to use this truth for the coherent and righteous ordering of human affairs. Plato believed that conflicting interests of different parts of society can be consistent. The best, rational and righteous, political order, which he proposes, leads to a harmonious agreement of society and allows each of its parts to flourish, but not at the expense of others.

The Republic: Among the major works of Plato in political philosophy, The Republic was collection of Plato's ideas in the field of ethics, metaphysics, philosophy and politics. The Republic, regarding justice, the greatest and most well- known work of Plato, was written in the form of a dialogue, a method of great prominence in clarifying questions and establishing truth. It was one of the premium examples of the dialectical method as stated and first developed by Socrates. Though Socrates did not provide a theoretical explanation of the method, he established a precise pattern of dialectical reasoning for others to follow. He

ISSN : 2348-5612 © URR





placed dialectics in the service of ethics, defining virtue as a basis for traditional and moral change. The argument in the Republic was conducted in a single room among Socrates. The Republic in Greek means justice, and should not be used or understood in this Latin sense meaning the states or the polity. William Ebenstein indicated that after twenty three hundred years the Republic "is still match less as an introduction to the basic issues that confront human being as citizens". No other writer on politics has equalled Plato in combining, penetrating and dialectical reasoning with poetic imagery and symbolism. One of the main norms of the Republic is that the right kind of government and politics can be the legitimate object of rigorous scientific thinking rather than the unavoidable product of muddling through fear and faith, indolence and improvisation.

In The Republic, Plato explained that the common opinion of justice in the contemporary world is that those who behave unjustly naturally gain power and become rulers and stronger people in society. On the other hand, when weak people behave in accordance with justice, they are underprivileged, and the strong gain the advantage. In the "second title, Concerning Justice" Plato equates justice with virtue, thus making them equal. Nevertheless, as one attempts to explain justice within the context of political discipline, one sees that laws were initially created to bring peace and social order to society. Bruell stated that The Republic presents itself as a thought of justice. This is an important statement because it demonstrates Plato's argument about the system of justice as a dynamic political philosophy. Consideration of justice displays that it is the work of the humanistic intellect rather than expose of a universal truth. Plato's deliberation of justice shows that in the sphere of justice, there are multiple ways to designate its private and public place in the society. He argued that justice is a methodical system and it functions according to the needs of the society and the individual. In fact, the system itself is so prevailing that it can become manipulative in regulating the lives of innocent individuals when such a system rests in the influence of powerful rulers who practice anarchy.

Plato (427-347) The Laws: Plato had significant contribution in the field of legal and political science. His last and longest dialogue, the Laws is highly important. In the form of an argument between an Athenian, a Spartan, and a Cretan, Plato outlines the "second-best" state (the "law state") in painstaking detail. While holding some of the idealism of the Republic, the Laws aims at a more attainable goal, a community based on the principle of



moderation. Consequently, Plato substituted the communal living arrangements of the Republic with private property and permitted citizens a voice in the management of public affairs. He also prefigured the famous "mixed" or "balanced" constitution, observing that democracy should be tempered with kingdom. His emphasis for making, revising, and teaching the laws is a tacit admission that the "royal science" of philosophers must give way to known and settled rules. Correspondingly, Plato's interest in existing institutions and appreciation for imperfect regimes serves as a bond to the more empirical and realistic politics of Aristotle.

Plato opined that justice does not consist just adhering to the laws, for it is based on the inner nature of human spirit, it is also to the victory of the stronger over the weaker, for it protects the weaker against the stronger. A just state, Plato contended that it is achieved with an eye to the good of the whole. In a just state or society, the rulers and military, the producers all do what they ought to do. In such a society, the rulers are intelligent, the soldiers are brave, and the producers exercise self- control or temperance. For Plato, justice is a moral notion. Prof: Ernest Barker indicated that justice for Plato is at once a part of human virtue and the bond which joins men together in the states. It makes man good and make him social" Prof. Sabine agreed with above statement and stated that Plato's Justice is a bound which holds the society together.

Plato described four deviant types of political regimes that include

1. Honour-Oriented Timocracy,
2. Wealth-Oriented Oligarchy,
3. Freedom-Oriented Democracy, And
4. Personal-Exploitation-Oriented Tyranny.

These regimes differ from the ideal reason-based regime (aristocracy), because timocracy is based on spirit, oligarchy on appetite, and democracy on a mixture of these two. Plato explains cyclical transformations of these regimes in light of the changes in the value structure, thereby stressing the significance of values and ideas on political makeover.

In contemporary political scenario, Plato and modern social theory has several common issues, such as the importance of the division of labour. He considers people as social persons who must live within a complex and interdependent social life. Although he accepts social class as a result of division of labour, he rejects class warfare and class-based economic disparity. His understanding of this division, with its vertical and disciplinary structure, also



differs from liberal social relations in terms of agreement or social contract (George Sabine, 195). Additionally, he asserts upon gender equality, for one's class membership depends only on merit, which, in turn, is based on one's quality of soul and education. For example, as "a male and a female doctor have souls of the same nature," they are equal (Sabine, A History of Political Theory),

Plato also contributed to develop political theory by describing, generalizing, and systematizing psychological and sociopolitical issues. The Republic's main contribution to political science emphasised on the role of ideas, values, and ethics in politics. He attaches importance to ideas and an intelligence not restricted by custom, instead of material/historical structural factors.

These contributions are very significant presently as the main problem today is the reconciliation of the classical aim of politics to enable human beings to live good and just lives in a political community with the modern demand of social thought, which is to achieve scientific knowledge of the workings of society.

Conclusion : Plato is one of the most prominent figures in Western philosophy. He was influential Greek philosopher, scientist, historian, and political theorist. He excelled in the fields of astrology, geometry and was acquainted with the doctrines of Greek leaders. Because he was a close follower of the teachings of Socrates, the majority of his ideas about the system of justice and his perception of how the system operates in society, directly represent those of Socrates. Thus, his relationship with Socrates leads him to learn the art of making and shaping his own theories that identify with his own individuality. Because his works are so significant to the political field, he is credited as the most celebrated Greek moralist. His early efforts in defending and defining the system of justice has gained him fame in the political arena.

References :

1. Ashcraft, Revolutionary Politics, London, Allen and Unwin, 1986.
2. Sir E. Barker, The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle, New York, Dover Publications, 1959.
3. Ashcraft, Locke's Two Treatises of Government, London Unwin and Hyman, 1987.
4. Sir E. Barker, Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors, New Delhi, B.I. Publications, 1964.