

MEANING, NATURE & DEFINITION OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

I. Meaning

Man is a social animal. He cannot live in isolation, because he is not self-sufficient and the natural instinct to survive compels him to live a collective life. According to Aristotle, this collective life necessitates a political mechanism of rules, regulations and leadership. An organized society needs some system to make and enforce rules for orderly behaviour in society. This led to the evolution of a political system with elaborate governmental institutions & procedures in each society. Therefore, man is also a political animal. Political science is one of the oldest subjects of study of this political life of man.

I. Nature

Politics is not only a mere institution of governance but also a mechanism for achieving societal goals. Political science is a social science concerned with the theory and practice of politics and the description and analysis of political systems and political behaviour. It includes matters concerning the allocation and transfer of power in decision making, the roles and systems of governance including governments and international organizations, political behavior and public policies.

**Political science is thus a study of the state in the past, present and future;
of political organization, political processes and political functions;
of political institutions and political theories.**

Political science has several subfields, including: political theory, public policy, national politics, international relations, human rights, environment politics and comparative politics.

Origin :- The term 'politics', is derived from the Greek word 'Polis', which means the city state. According to Greek Philosophers, Politics was a subject which dealt with all the activities and affairs of the city state. Their City States were known as 'Polis'. City state was an all inclusive term, as the ancient Greeks made no distinction between the state and the Government on one hand, and State and Society on the other. They never differentiated between personal life and social life. Hence according to them Politics was a total study of man, society, state, morality and so on.

a. The antecedents of Western politics can trace their roots back to Greek thinkers Socrates, Plato (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). The studies were philosophy oriented. Plato wrote The Republic and Aristotle wrote the Politics. **Aristotle** is known as the Father of Political Science. He is famous for his statement "Man is a political animal". The word 'politics' is derived from the Greek word 'polis', which means a city-state.

b. During the height of the Roman Empire, famous historians documented the rise of the Roman Republic, and the organization and histories of other nations, while statesmen like Julius Caesar, Cicero and others provided us with examples of the politics of the republic and Rome's empire and wars. The study of politics during this age was oriented toward understanding history, understanding methods of governing, and describing the operation of governments.

During the Middle Ages, the study of politics was widespread in the churches and courts. Saint Thomas Aquinas was an important political thinker of this period.

c. During the Italian Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli established the emphasis of modern political science on direct empirical observation of political institutions and actors. His famous book, 'The Prince' is a guide to modern realist politics. Other famous men of this period were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke & Rousseau (Social contract theory). Important figures in American politics of this period were Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

d. In ancient India, the antecedents of politics can be traced back to the Rig-Veda, Samhitas, Brahmanas, the Mahabharata and Buddhist Pali Canon. Chanakya (c. 350-275 BC) was a political thinker in Takshashila. He wrote the Arthashastra, a treatise on political thought, economics and social order, which can be considered a precursor to Machiavelli's The Prince. It discusses monetary and fiscal policies, welfare, international relations, and war strategies in detail, among other topics. Manusmriti, dated to about two centuries after the time of Chanakya is another important political treatise of ancient India.

Stages of Evolution

- (1) philosophical: concerned with ends and purposes
- (2) institutional: concerned with political organization
- (3) behavioural: concerned with motivations and mechanism of human behavior
- (4) pluralistic: concerned with the interaction among groups and organizations
- (5) structural: concerned with the connection between the individual and the community
- (6) developmental: concerned with the process of growth, industrialization and change and the impact on government forms and policies.

Politics as the study of the state:-

Traditionally Political science is a science of state. Political thinkers like R.G. Gettel, J.W. Garner, Bluntschli and many others were of the view that political science was the study of the state.

R.G. Gettel defined "Political Science as a study of state in the past, present and future and of Political institutions and Political theories". J.W.Garner States, "Political Science begins and ends with the state"

Politics as the study of the Government :- Some Political Scientists like Paul Janet, George Catlin, Hans Eulan have accepted the view which states that politics deals with the state and government. Paul Janet writes "Political Science is concerned with the foundations of the state and principles of government. George Catlin states "Politics means either the activities of political life or the study of these activities. And these activities are generally treated as activities of the various organs of government." Prof Hans Eulan considers in his definition of politics that the study of formal government is a fundamental concern of politics. The

Oxford English Dictionary defines Political Science as “the study of the state and systems of government.”

Politics as the study of national Institution :- Bridal expressed the view that “Political Science is, above all, descriptive study which brings together the description of national political institutions, their history, their ideological principles, their working, the forces that direct them, the influence they undergo, the results they obtain and their effect on the life of the country and its relations with neighboring states “.

Traditional Approach :- The concept of Political Science as a study of State, Government and national Institution is not considered adequate today. This aspect of above definitions emphasizes the legal structure only. They do not pay attention to what is happening withing the State. Political Science must include the study of informal structures, facts and reality of Politics. Hence ,modern Political thinkers defined Political Science differently and taken modern approach.

Political Science as a Study of Power :- Modern Political thinkers like Lasswell, Robert Dahl have defined politics in terms of power, influence, and authority. According to these thinkers Power has acquired prominent position in political thought. Harold Lasswell considers, “Politics is the study of shaping and sharing Political powers” Robert A. Dahl defined that, “A Political system is any persistent pattern of human relationship that involves, to a significant extent power, rule or authority.”

II. Importance of the study of political science (Scope)

The study of politics is both humanistic and scientific, and is centuries old. Aristotle called it the "queen of the sciences". Today's political research involves highly scientific and rigorous attempts to understand human behavior and world events. Political scientists provide the frameworks from which journalists, special interest groups, politicians, and the electorate analyze issues.

Political science as a discipline deals with various aspects like:

- a. *Study of state and government*- it deals with the nature and formation of the State and tries to understand various forms and functions of the government.
- b. *Study of associations and institutions*- in organized way the fundamental problems of political science include, first, an investigation of the origin and the nature of the state, second an inquiry into the nature, history and forms of political institutions and third, deduction, therefore, so far as possible, of laws of political growth and development.
- c. *Study of national and international problems*- modern demands of defense of territory, representative government and national unity have made political science not only the science of political independence but that of state sovereignty also.

d. *Study of political behavior of man*- it may be said that the character of political science in all its parts is determined by its basic pre-supposition regarding man.

e. *Study of the past, present and future of development*- political science attempts to explain the meaning and the essential nature of the state and deals with the laws of its progress and development within itself and in relation to international organizations and other states.

f. *Study of the concepts of power, authority & influence*- with the behavioural revolution the central topic for study has become the study of power. Consequently the scope has widened to include new aspects like political socialization, political culture, political development and informal structures like interest and pressure groups.

III. Definitions

1. From the **traditional point of view** we may define political science as “the study of the state and government in all their manifestations, aspects and relationships”. In this sense, politics can be domestic, national, federal, municipal or international.

These early definitions of political science dealt generally with state and government.

- a. J.W. Garner: “Political Science begins and ends with the state”; “Politics is the study of State & Government”.
- b. R.G. Gettel: “Political Science is the historical investigation of what the state has been, an analytical study of what the state is and a political, ethical discussion of what the state ought to be”.
- c. Leacock: “Political science deals with government only”.
- d. Paul Janet: “Political science is that part of the social science which treats the foundations of the state and the principles of government”.

2. In the beginning of the 20th century there developed a new way of looking at political science. This new approach is known as **behavioural approach**. The main thrust of the new view is the treatment of politics **as an activity and a process**.

In this context, new definitions emerged.

- e. Harold Laswell: “Politics is the study of influence and the influential” or “the study of the shaping and sharing of power”
- f. David Easton: “Politics is the authoritative allocation of values.”
- g. Catlin: “Political Science is the study of the act of human and social control”.
- h. Andrew Heywood: “Politics can be defined as an activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live.”

Modern political scientists consider politics as a process centering around power and influence. They are concerned with not just the state and the government, but also the study and evaluation of political activities, political power, processes and non-governmental institutions.

IV. Perspectives on politics

Politics as a human (social) activity: Simple things like our opinions, perceptions of rights & wrongs, competing needs, conflicting interests ultimately leads to a system of rules for conflict resolution and cooperation. The inescapable presence of diversity and scarcity ensures that politics is an inevitable feature of human condition. Adrian Leftwich (What is Politics?) finds politics is the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies.

Andrew Heywood (Politics 2007) sees Politics as follows:

(1) *Politics as art of government:* Here politics is the classic activity of making and enforcement of collective decisions. The state as the central concept of politics has a long history. The state has several specialized structures, institutions, officer and roles. It has the monopoly of coercive power. In these circumstances, it was natural to understand politics as the study of the state. Until the Second World War, the state served as the chief organizing idea of politics.

(2) *Politics as public affairs:* The meaning of politics can be stretched beyond the narrow realm of government to a broader conception of 'public life' or 'public affairs', because of its 'public' character. Aristotle said 'man is a political animal'. Rousseau and JS mill supported this outlook.

(3) *Politics as compromise & consensus (study of interaction among interest groups):* According to this, politics has a wider scope. Politics is seen as an act of conflict and cooperation among individuals and various groups in the society to secure values like liberty, equality, justice, welfare etc., and to organize and use a public power for this purpose (Bernard Crick). Politics is thus an interaction between man & society resolving conflicts through conciliation and negotiation instead of violence. Both the liberal and Marxist views of politics study it as a part of this social process. As a result of this, non-formal institutions like pressure groups, public opinion, interest groups, political parties etc. became the subjects of politics.

Thus, within its fold, there are discussions on theories of state origin, functions, sovereignty, liberty, rights forms and organs of government, representation, political parties, pressure groups, public opinion, ideologies, and international relations and institutions.

(4) *Politics as the study of power:* After rejecting politics as the study of state as insufficient, modern thinkers tried to find the axis of politics and they found it in the concept of power. The new understanding of politics was that it is a struggle to share or influence the distribution of power, whether between states or among the groups within the state. There are two advantages

to study politics from the point of view of power- firstly, it focuses attention on process rather than on legal abstractions of the state. Secondly, this approach pays greater attention to man as the basic unit of analysis. Politics became directly concerned with the needs, interests and goals of men that give rise to power-relationship among them and ultimately lead to a public policy.

In short there are three forms of power: political, economic and ideological. Political power is concerned with the maintenance of law and order and dispensing justice through reward and punishment.

Politics as the study of power (in detail)

Though identifiable with terms like influence, coercion, force, domination, authority, control and the like, the term 'power' has its own meaning. Power is a relation. While power is coercive, influence is persuasive authority is the legitimate aspect of power and force is manifested power.

Power is "the ability to determine the behaviour of others in accord with one's own wishes". The power theory of politics is as old as the Greeks, though it has assumed much importance in recent times. Power consists fundamentally of relationships, of subordination, of dominance and submission, of the governors and the governed and the study of politics involves the study of these relationships.

In other words, the study of politics is concerned with the description and analysis of the manner in which power is obtained, exercised and controlled, and the purpose for which it is used, the manner in which decisions are made, the factors which influence the making of these decisions and the context in which these decisions are made.

Power can be exhibited in three dimensions: political, economic and ideological.

Political power: it belongs to the state and is manifested through the organs of the government like legislature, executive, military, judiciary, police, bureaucracy etc. Power is shared by political parties, pressure groups, elites, factions, leaders etc. Power exists in all political processes, however democratic they may be.

Liberals say that power is dispersed in society and that it changes hands often. Marxists hold a different viewpoint. According to them power is concentrated in a class and only revolution can make it to change hands.

Economic power: finds its place in the form of ownership and control of national wealth, as well as means of production and distribution. Economic power and political power are mutually complementary.

Liberals say that it is diffused and hard work determines the degree of economic power one can gain. Marxists again hold the view that economic power is also concentrated in the hands of a few and they manipulate it to gain political power.

Ideological power: resides in the prevailing ideas acceptable to the people. Ideology literally means a set of ideas in which people have unquestionable faith and they also strive to put them into action. The dominant class will also try to propagate and implement ideas that are congenial to their interests, whether economic or political. They may use all available media, elites, intellectuals, religious institutions, educational systems, associations and institutions to achieve this while oppressing counter ideologies.

Authority: Power with legitimacy. Max Weber classifies it into three: traditional, charismatic & legal-rational or bureaucratic.