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Socio-political thought in classical India

DAYA KRISHNA

Indian classical thought about society and polity had to deal with a basic dilemma which was set for it by the fundamental premises of the culture in which it developed. This derived from the fact that both Buddhism and Jainism, which emerged as powerful forces on the Indian scene sometime in the sixth century BCE, regarded the social and political worlds not only as inferior realities in relation to the ultimate pursuit of man, but also as impeding that pursuit to a substantive extent. And this, strangely enough, occurred in spite of the fact that both of these religions spread with the active support of kings and wealthy merchants, as evidenced in the earliest stories pertaining to the times of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra (the founder of Jainism). Yet, as every thinker concerned with these realms well knows, they constitute the very basis and foundation of all the worthwhile pursuits of man, including the spiritual pursuits. Thinkers dealing with these subjects, therefore, had simultaneously to be true to the reality of the realm they were thinking about and also be on the right side of the values dominant in the culture in which they lived. In addition, they had to take into account the changes that occurred in their culture over time, for while both society and polity may have dimensions that are comparatively invariant, there are also those which are subject to important changes that inevitably occur with the passage of time. The latter feature is revealed more in the legal texts, which have to take note of the changes that occur in social customs and deal with them fairly directly, than in the theoretical and abstract issues relating to society and polity with which the social and political theorists are primarily concerned.

Any discussion of classical Indian thought about society and polity, has thus inevitably to take into account Indian thought about man, on the one hand, and law, on the other. The texts relating to these discussions are roughly known as the *Dharmaśāstras*, the *Vyavahāraśāstras*, and the *Rājanītiśāstras*. The term "śāstra" denotes a systematic body of knowledge, and the terms "dharma," "vyavahāra" and "rājanīti" denote what is generally conveyed in the English language by morality, law and polity. That society is primarily seen as belonging to the moral dimension of man speaks volumes for the way in which man himself was understood in the Indian tradition. Society was seen primarily as the realm in which an individual had obligations to others – obligations that were understood in terms of the roles that he or she occupied in the system. These obligations, however, had to be

coordinated with the claims of the transcendent self as well as with the claims of all other beings – including the gods, close relatives who were dead, and other living beings in the world. The term “*dharma*” thus has a far wider connotation than is usually indicated by the term “morality” in the English language. The realm of *vyavahāra*, or law, was however far more concrete and related to the adjudication of disputes that were enforceable by the judicial and political authorities, and often, by quasi-judicial institutions whose authority, however, was formally recognized by the political system wherein rested the use of legitimate coercive power. The technical term for this was “*danḍa*,” which primarily means both “punishment” and “instruments of punishment.” The science of polity thus was also called *danḍanīti*. The realm of the political, however, was not confined wholly to the legitimate exercise of coercion in the service of the maintenance of *dharma* or the moral order, but had also to be seen in relation to other polities amidst which it was situated.

The relation of society, polity and law were complicated in classical Indian thought by a number of factors that are important to keep in mind. Thinking about society, as has been repeatedly stressed, was primarily undertaken in relation to the *varṇa* or class/caste scheme, in terms of which society has been thought to be integrally constituted. The well known scheme of four *varṇas* – that is, the *brāhmaṇa* (priest), the *kṣatriya* (warrior), the *vaiśya* (merchant) and the *śūdra* (worker) – is supposed to have been derived from the Vedas themselves, wherein it is allegedly said that the cosmic being divided itself into these four classes from different parts of its body. (The English equivalents of these terms, though fairly commonly used, are misleading, as is explained later in the article. The term “*brāhmaṇa*,” for example, does not refer only to priests, but also to all those who maintain, transmit and develop systems of traditional knowledge in any field whatsoever. Similarly, the term “*vaiśya*” applies as much to those who cultivate land as to those who engage in trade or commerce. The term “*śūdra*” is a residual category and applies to the whole artisan class which is engaged in the manufacture of all sorts of things, including what are today called “handicrafts.”) The body social, therefore, is supposed to represent, at the level of society, the cosmic being itself, from which it was supposed to have originated. However, the Vedic source of the theory of cosmic creation, or more correctly, of cosmic diremption, does not confine itself to the creation of these four *varṇas* alone, but rather is concerned with the coming into being of the whole manifest universe, with the important proviso that the cosmic being manifests itself in this universe with only one-fourth of its being, while three-fourths of it remains unmanifest. Moreover, if one looks at some of the original passages wherein the existence of the *varṇas* is first described, as in the *Śukla Yajurveda*, for instance, one finds that besides the basic four *varṇas*, others are mentioned that are specifically classified as *abrāhamaṇāḥ*, *aśūdrāḥ* (non-brahmins and non-śūdras) in the concluding line, so that it is difficult to see how the myth of there being *only* four *varṇas* in the body social ever arose. (It is obvious that these multifarious classes, professions, and so on, mentioned in the text could not be *kṣatriyas* or *vaiśyas* either). Not only this, there is sufficient evidence in Jaimini’s *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* that if the Vedic injunctions were to be taken seriously, then at

least two classes mentioned therein – that is, the *rathakāra* and the *niṣadapati* – could not be included in any of these *varṇas*. It should be noted that the former is an occupational class, that is, those who build chariots, while the latter perhaps designates a tribal chief. There are other places in the recognized portion of the “revealed” texts known as *śruti* that seem to question even the exclusion of the *śūdras* from access to the *śruti* and the performance of the *yajñas* or sacrifices prescribed therein. The most notable and radical example is found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*. However, these only show the ambivalence of the pronouncements in the texts which are by common consent included in what is known as the *śruti*.

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, the story of Satyakāma Jābāla is one of the internally subverting portions of the material included in the *śruti*. The ambivalence and the internal tension in the authoritative texts can perhaps be explained either in terms of the inner conflict in the tradition itself or by means of the hypothesis that those portions of the texts that seem to have questioned the orthodox positions might have appeared earlier or later, as the case may be. In fact, the explicit proclamation of Bharata in the *Nāṭya Śāstra* that it is *sārvavarṇika* – that is, open to all the *varṇas* – might be seen as a statement made in full self-consciousness against the claims of the Veda which, according to the orthodox view, was accessible only to the first three *varṇas*. Its self-description as the fifth Veda also seems to support this view, although there seems to have been a tendency for important works in the tradition to assume this title in order to claim for themselves an authority equivalent to that of the Veda or even superior to it. The Mahābhārata provides another well known example of this tendency.

The theory of *varṇa*, however, was only an ideal construct and seemed to have had only a formal classificatory validity, as what existed in fact was a very large number of *jātis* which, theoretically, were supposed to belong to one or the other of the four *varṇas*. However, whether seen as a formal classification or as an ideal construct, it should be understood as an articulation of the four primary functions that any human society will have to maintain, foster and develop in order to be a society. The functions may be regarded as relating to knowledge, power, wealth, and labour, and may be seen as associated respectively with the *varṇas* designated as *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra* respectively. The contention, therefore, seems to have been that the body social is an organic unity of all these functions and those who primarily or predominantly perform these functions may be designated by these terms.

The first issue of debate among social theorists, therefore, was whether the terms designating the functions should be understood in terms of “ascription” or “achievement.” Does a person belong to these categories by birth or by virtue of his acquired capacities or abilities to perform those functions? The well known statement that by birth everyone is a *śūdra* epitomizes this view, for presumably everyone can perform the labour function by virtue of the fact that one has a body. But such a view could never gain any large social sanction for the simple reason that society cannot wait for one’s capacities to unfold before assigning one to a particular *varṇa*, even if only for ritual purposes. And, in any case, ascriptive

determinations are always easier than those based on "achievement," which is hardly constant over time.

Yet though the classification by birth was overwhelmingly chosen, socio-political theorists still faced the difficult problem of establishing a method for determining who was qualified to be a king and perform the ruling function. In accordance with the *varṇa* theory, only a *ṣatriya* could perform this function, since to be a *ṣatriya* almost analytically entailed that one was fit to exercise this function. But obviously if one were to decide who was a *ṣatriya* by appeal to the criterion of birth, one might be landed with a ruler who was totally incompetent to rule. On the other hand, if one usurped the ruling function by force of arms or in any other way, then one became the *de facto* ruler and exercised power, and thus provided concrete evidence that one was a *ṣatriya*. Both horns of the dilemma are frequently encountered in the socio-political thought of India and, after long debate, the conclusion was reached that though it would be best if a ruler were born a *ṣatriya*, anyone who is capable of exercising the ruling function well should be the ruler and be regarded as a *ṣatriya*. The history of India is replete with this *de facto* recognition of rulers as *ṣatriyas* – that is, as those who had the skill to become kings – without anyone caring whether they were born as *ṣatriyas* or not. The great empires known in India right from the Mauryan times onwards, were seldom founded by a person belonging to the *ṣatriya varṇa*, or to a *jāti* supposed to belong to this *varṇa*.

The socio-political theorists of India had, however, not only to face the question of who could exercise the ruling function, given the theory of *varṇa* that they had inherited from ancient times, but also the question of how exactly the ideal relations between the different *varṇas* were to be understood. Here, obviously, the problem related primarily to the three upper *varṇas*, as the *sūdras* did not enter the picture except in a residual or marginal manner. The conflict between power and knowledge and wealth is writ large in the history of all civilizations, but it took a peculiar turn in the history of thought about society and polity in India. In fact, the conflict between the *brāhmaṇas* and the *ṣatriyas* is well known from the most ancient times, recorded as it is in the earliest texts. However, the conflict that engaged the attention of the socio-political theorists most involved the "overseeing" by the brahmanical *varṇa* of those who exercised the ruling function, and of the former's attempts to ensure that the rulers observed the norms that were expected of them. This obviously was not palatable to the rulers, as they did not want any constraints placed on the exercise of their power. The realm of politics, like the realm of love, tends toward the violation of all norms whatsoever. In the Indian context, in which the general term for all norms is *dharma*, the conflict is thus centered around the observance of *dharma* by the king. The first move that was made to ensure the safety of the censors or the critics of those who ruled was to argue that they should be immune from any punishment, as it was feared that the king might implicate them with all sorts of false accusations and punish them for being outspoken in their criticism of what the ruling power did.

The technical name for this was *adaṇḍya* and many of the early legal texts laid down that the *brāhmaṇa* is *adaṇḍya*. But as this seemed to go against the principle of

justice, later texts argued for a differential theory of punishment for the same offense, suggesting that the punishment should be correlated to what was expected from a particular *varṇa* and hence, while many offenses were lightly treated in the case of the *sūdras*, who were not supposed to live up to strict norms in certain areas of conduct, the *brāhmaṇa* was to be punished more severely, since more was expected of him. On the other hand, there were certain other types of offenses for which he was let off lightly. Ultimately, however, this also offended the sense of justice and it was argued that only capital punishment should never be given to a *brāhmaṇa*. But then the last of the important legal texts, the *Sukranīti*, argues for the abolition of capital punishment for all *varṇas* and seems to suggest that one ought not to make a distinction between the *brāhmaṇa* and the non-*brāhmaṇa* in this regard. The story of India's legal thought on this matter, moving gradually from the contention that *brāhmaṇas* should be *adaṇḍya* to the conclusion that they should be *avadhya* (that is, someone who cannot be killed), is fascinating, showing as it does the successive stages in the thinking of the legal theorists as they struggled to safeguard the brahmins' independence so that they might exercise their function fearlessly in the body politic of those times.

It has become fashionable these days to characterize classical Indian civilization as brahmanical in character, forgetting that all civilizations are inevitably brahmanical, since those who articulate, conceptualize, argue for and defend the deepest concerns of any civilization cannot but be those who are committed to intellectual pursuits and who are concerned preeminently with reflection on the norms by which individuals, societies and polities should be governed. The brahmanical class in India not only did this to a substantial degree, but also tried to ensure that the function they exercised was valued highly by the society itself. There can, of course, be differences among civilizations as to which social function they regard as the highest. Some may opt for power and others for wealth. But as far as the classical Indian tradition was concerned, the only rival to the claim made on behalf of knowledge as the highest pursuit of man was the claim advanced on behalf of the pursuit of transcendence or, to use the term coined by the tradition itself for this pursuit, *mokṣa*. The ascetic renouncer epitomized in the Buddhist *bhikṣu* and the Jain *muni* from the sixth century BCE onwards was regarded as pursuing something higher and nobler than what the *brāhmaṇa* pursued.

There were earlier precedents for this in the Upaniṣadic and even in the Vedic tradition, but there the life of the householder and the life of the renouncer were not separated in such a clear-cut manner or seen as radically antagonistic to each other. This ultimate superiority of the ascetic renouncer even to those who exercised the knowledge and the norm-establishing function in the Indian tradition introduced a new problematic for the socio-political thinkers of India. For while most societies and civilizations have known the conflict between knowledge and power, few have witnessed a comparable tension between those who have renounced the world (including not only family, society and polity, but also the pursuit of knowledge in the usual sense of the word) and those who have not. However, if one is a socio-political thinker, one has to accept the reality and validity

of society and polity, and one cannot subordinate the claims of these realms that are the object of one's study to those which deny them altogether, at least in principle if not in practice. And yet an almost insoluble problem is set for such thinkers if the culture itself accords the highest value to the life of the renouncer. As everyone knows, this was the case in India, and consequently a large part of its socio-political thought was concerned with solving this insoluble dilemma. There are, of course, deep differences in this regard between the social theorists on the one hand and the political theorists on the other, particularly those among the latter who are exclusively concerned with the realm of the political.

The conflict between the *kṣatriya* and the *brāhmaṇa* is well known to students of Indian thought, as is the fact that they were mutually indispensable. Similarly, the conflict between the *brāhmaṇa* and the *śramaṇa* (the renouncer) is also well known, though not much emphasized in the socio-political thought of India. However, the relation between the *kṣatriya* – or to be more precise in this context, the *rājanya* or king – and the *śramaṇa* or renouncer has seldom been discussed. Yet right from the earliest Buddhist and Jain texts recounting the lives of the Buddha and the Mahāvira, it was a point of special emphasis that the ruling kings in those times not only paid visits to these outstanding spiritual personalities of the time, but showed proper respect by getting down from their elephants and chariots and walking on foot to the abode of the master. Many of the Mughal paintings display continuity in this regard as they show Mughal emperors visiting the hermitages of saints, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in a respectful manner and generally on foot. In fact, in many of the stories in both the Buddhist and the Jain canons we hear of kings who got converted to these religions and sometimes even renounced their kingship to pursue the path of the renouncer. But normally the tension between the two roles seldom comes into the open. However, one does sometimes become aware of it indirectly, as in the stories in which the Buddha's own father requests him to make a rule that no young person will be allowed to join the *saṅgha*, or at least none who has not been permitted by his parents to do so. This obviously hints at the tension generated by the large-scale recruitment of the young to the life of the renouncers. But far more telling and explicit is the statement in the political texts of the tradition that any person desirous of *mokṣa* should not be appointed as minister by the king, and that the king himself should not think of leaving his responsibilities or retire to the forest.

The triangular relation between the seekers and wielders of power, and those who seek knowledge and to articulate norms for human behavior, and those who search for final liberation and transcendence from the world of space, time and causality would make an interesting theme for exploration, particularly in the context of the dilemmas that Indian civilization faced in its diverse pursuits. But it needs to be remembered that while many might be engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and some in the search for liberation, the ruler in any particular realm could only be a single person, and though the term "*rājanya*" generally stands for one who rules, it is flexible enough to be applied to anyone who exercises the ruling function over the smallest territory. By its very nature, the ruling function does not and cannot admit of plurality or multiplicity amongst those who exercise it in the

political sense, that is, as wielders of legitimate coercive power. The term "*kṣatriya*," therefore, has an ambiguity about it that the term "*brāhmaṇa*" or the terms for the renouncers ("*bhikṣu*," "*muni*," or "*sannyāsi*") would not usually have. The term "*kṣatriya*" in the tradition applies both to one who rules in the political sense of the term and also to one who earns his living by means of carrying or wielding arms. The two functions are obviously related to each other, but they are also essentially different in that one who rules utilizes those whose profession consists in the skillful use of arms in the service of anyone who is prepared to employ them. The *brāhmaṇa*, on the other hand, is supposed to engage in the search for knowledge, especially of the Vedas, and in teaching this to others. It should be noted in this connection that the knowledge relating to the Vedas covered a very wide field and included even such sciences as astronomy, geometry, linguistics, grammar, and almost everything directly or indirectly related to the maintenance and preservation of the Vedic texts, on the one hand, and to the performance of the *yajña* or the sacrificial rituals enjoined in them, on the other.

The ambivalent relations between knowledge and power and of both to the renouncers have not gone unnoticed in the literature on the subject, but the same cannot be said about the relations between those who sought wealth, the *vaiśyas*, and those who wielded power and knowledge, on the one hand, and those who renounced the pursuit of all worldly ends, on the other. The texts on the subject also seem to show an awareness only of the problems concerning the relations of power and wealth, and not of those between wealth and knowledge, or between wealth and the pursuit of the radical renunciatory ideal. The discussion in the texts regarding the former is mainly confined to the question of how a king should try to get the maximum out of those who create wealth in his kingdom without making them feel that they are being excessively taxed, so that they may not be discouraged in the pursuit itself or leave the realm for other kingdoms. However, in times of emergency the king is both advised and permitted to extract as much as possible even at the risk of antagonizing those who create wealth in his kingdom. There are many amusing analogies given from other fields that suggest ways in which a ruler can collect taxes from the population, and the well known text of Kautilya on the subject offers detailed measures to check the loopholes in the taxation system. The ambivalent relations between the *brāhmaṇa* and the *vaiśya* are not discussed in the texts, since normally it is the ruler who is supposed to provide patronage and support to those who pursue knowledge in any form. The pursuit of wealth, however, was not rated very highly among the meaningful pursuits of man, at least as far as the texts are concerned. Yet the virtue of *dāna*, or the giving of gifts to brahmins is extolled very highly and, in fact, there are numerous ritual occasions, from birth to death, at which the brahmins are expected to be compensated for their ritual services. But one has to acquire wealth before one is in a position to give it as a gift to others. Yet the pursuit itself was considered inferior to the pursuit of knowledge or the renunciatory ideal whose practitioners had to depend on the merchant class for their sustenance. Such a dependence on those who sought wealth or power (two meanings of *artha* as a *puruṣārtha*, that is, as an ideal the pursuit of which conferred meaning on human life) was humiliating, for at least theoretically, what they

themselves were pursuing was far, far superior to wealth or power. The dilemma and the ambivalence becomes even greater in the case of the renouncer, as he explicitly denies the realms of family, society, and polity altogether and the values that belong to those realms. And yet he has to depend, at least minimally, on society for his own survival and the pursuit of the trans-social and the transcendental value that he has chosen for himself. The dilemma becomes still more acute when, as in the case of the Buddhists and the Jains, their organization of themselves into a community is taken as an essential part of their spiritual pursuit. The Buddhists treat the *saṅgha* as almost coordinate in importance to the Buddha and the *dhamma*, and as for the Jains, though they do not seem to have anything as explicit as the Buddhist vow to take refuge in the *saṅgha* along with the Buddha and the *dhamma*, the actual reality is perhaps even more stringent in their case than in that of the Buddhists. The Buddhist *bhikṣu* or Jain *muni*, in other words, is not an individual wandering ascetic or a *sannyāsī*, who has left the world like the Buddha or the Mahāvīra in search of enlightenment or perfection. He is an integral member of a large community that dictates and determines the shape of his life and spiritual quest in the most detailed manner imaginable. This has far-reaching implications for the style of spiritual seeking itself, but what primarily concerns us here is that, right from the times of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra, the necessity of such forms of organization for the spiritual seeking that the *bhikṣu* and *muni* embodied in their individual lives created a new dimension of large-scale dependence on the ruler, on the one hand, and on the wealthy trading community, on the other. The large-scale support that such organizations required from the society and the polity must have meant that the society and the polity exerted at least some influence on the spiritual pursuit itself. There is some evidence, even in the Upaniṣads, of spiritual seekers depending upon kings – as is related in the stories of Yājñavalkya and Janaka – but there the encounter is primarily individual and involves a debate or discussion regarding certain kinds of knowledge. The Buddhist and the Jain texts talk almost from the very beginning of thousands of *bhikṣus* and *munis* being entertained by wealthy merchants eager to earn merit, which must obviously have meant a great deal given the expenditure incurred on such occasions. Somehow the Buddhist and the Jain forms of large-scale organizations became the dominant model to be revived later by Śaṅkara and followed by later masters and teachers (*ācāryas*) in the Indian tradition, even though the lonely, wandering individual ascetic never disappeared from the scene.

The profound effect of the formation of these “societies” or renouncers and the internal organization of discipline and hierarchies within them has hardly been the subject of study or reflection, particularly as these societies began to have both an economic and political aspect to them, mirroring almost all of the problems of the outside society and polity. The problems of seeking economic and political support and the tensions it generated for the pursuit of spiritual life are writ large not only on the histories of these institutions, but are also depicted on the walls of many of the places where such monasteries were supposed to have been located – as, for example, in Bagh or Ajanta. This, however, opens up a direction of thought that has not been dealt with by the classical thinkers of India.

The political thinkers of India had no such problems as those facing the social theorists, for while the latter had to consider almost all aspects of society and register the conflicting relationships between them, the former were concerned primarily with the realm of the political and treated everything else as a means to the maintenance and enhancement of political power. But as the political thinker was acutely aware, the polity was situated amongst other polities which were always potentially hostile to it. Thus the obligations of a ruler to his own people, even at the theoretical level, had to be balanced against the ever-present possibility of attack from the hostile neighboring kingdom. The political theorist, therefore, was concerned with a dimension that was absent in the work of those who theorized about society for, as far as I know, no one has placed the external relations of a society to other societies at the center of his thought about society. The Indian political theorist developed in this context, the well known theory of concentric circles of neighboring kingdoms, in accordance with which the relations of hostility and friendship were determined to a large extent by geo-political considerations. This is perhaps the first systematic attempt at geo-political thinking anywhere in the world and at seeing the realm of the political as primarily determined by relationships external to a polity, because of its intrinsic character as a polity among other polities and not an isolated unit in itself.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that, in traditional thinking everywhere, it was regarded as legitimate for a ruler to conquer other kingdoms and to extend and expand his area of control as far as possible. The great conquerors of the world have, in fact, been the heroes of history. And though today the ministries until recently designated as ministries of war have become ministries of defence, this change only camouflages the basic truth, which remains the same. Defensive preparedness inevitably includes offensive capability and the task of enlarging one's area of influence both by overt and covert means remains the legitimate exercise of nation-states today, even though each and every state swears by the authority of the United Nations, which it regards as superior to its own.

In the context of classical Indian political thought, however, the legitimation of conquest of neighboring kingdoms followed almost logically from the geo-political analysis of political structures, which entailed that a neighbouring kingdom was bound to be potentially hostile, not because of any perversity on its part, but because of the simple fact that it was situated as it was. As offense is supposed to be the best means of defense, the conquering of neighboring kingdoms was seen not only as the expansion of one's area of influence, but also as the elimination of a potential threat from the geo-politically conditioned hostility of one's neighbor. It was forgotten, however, that the problem of the “neighbor,” just like the problem of the frontier, is always bound to be there, since even if a conquest is successful it merely moves the frontier forward, bringing one into contact with another neighbor with whom one will have to contend.

The Indian political theorist tried to come to terms with this inevitable reality imposed by the very structural situation of all polities in two ways. First, he tried to formulate the ideal of *cakravartin* or the ruler who had conquered all that could

reasonably be regarded as "available" for conquest in his times. This was the notion of "globalization" in the political context and has continued to hold sway even in modern times in the notion of the superpower. With the elimination of the Soviet Union as the possible counter-contender for that role, the role of the universal *cakravartin* has been self-consciously assumed in our day by the United States, and this has been justified by its political theorists as legitimate in the contemporary context.

The second strategy was to concentrate not on the extent of the dominion over which the conquering function was exercised, but rather on the notion of "conquering" itself. The conquests were thus classified into *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika*, terms which were borrowed from Sāṃkhya philosophy, but which were modified and used in distinguishing the virtuous from the vicious conqueror. It should be interesting in this regard to note that the motivation for conquest, the conduct of the war and the pacification after victory were all taken into account in this classification. The virtuous conqueror engaged in the exercise only to eliminate potential hostility and normally he was supposed to be satisfied with the acceptance of his suzerainty by the conquered king (or any of his close relatives, if he had been killed in the battle). In fact, the battle itself was supposed to be the last resort, for if one's suzerainty or overlordship was accepted in principle, one did not go to war for the sheer joy of conquest or loot, as conquerors belonging to the second and third category usually did.

The political theorist was also interested in theoretically countering the radically individualistic implications of the theory of *karma*, which almost led to a "moral monadism," implying as it did that no one could be held responsible for what happened to one and that, in turn, one could not really be responsible for what happened to anyone else, determined as each was by his or her own *karma* or what he or she had done in the past. The social theorist was also concerned with the issue, but while he developed a theory of debts and obligations to one's own parents, teachers and the gods, he did not develop a theory of collective responsibility in terms of which he could justify these claims. The political theorist, on the other hand, developed such a theory through the idea of the king's sharing in the merits and demerits earned by his subjects through the performance of good or bad deeds, for he was supposed to be directly or indirectly responsible for what they did. They thus developed a theory of the collective community of moral agents, in which there was a joint sharing in the fruits of action. Theoretical differences related only to the actual share of the king in the merits and demerits of his subjects. Some argued that it should be one-fourth, while the majority seem to have opted for one-sixth. But strangely, neither the political nor the social theorists moved forward to develop a full-fledged theory of *karma* in which collective responsibility could become the center of theoretical concern in reflection on human action. It is only the king who was supposed to share in the merit and demerits of his subjects, but as far as his subjects were concerned, there was no "sharing" in the fruits of the virtuous or vicious acts that they did.

The historical development of the socio-political thought of India has not been the subject of any detailed study. It has not even been paid much attention by those

who have written on Indian philosophy. Nor have the interrelationships between the developments in different domains been the subject of serious investigation. Yet the very fact that such a large number of texts relating to *dharma*, *rājanīti* and *vyavahāra* (that is, society, polity and law) were written is itself evidence of such a development. There is, of course, a widespread impression that nothing new was said on the subject, but there can be little doubt that this is a superficial view of the matter. Laxman Sastri Joshi's *Dharma Kośa*, particularly in its *Rājanīti* and *Vyavahāra kāṇḍa*, is a monumental refutation of this facile impression. Also it should be remembered that it is the legal texts of a culture that respond more to the changing situation than the texts relating to society and polity, which can afford the luxury of remaining conservative in thought, if not in practice, over a longer period of time. In fact, even in the field of philosophy, in which radical developments are known to have occurred, the usual picture is of static systems that remained unchanged for millennia after the crystallization of their fundamental insights in the *sūtra* literature around the early centuries of the Christian era.

The vitality of this whole tradition of socio-political thought, even in recent times, may be seen from the fact that as late as the eighteenth century one of the ministers of the newly emergent Maratha successor state of the Mughal empire wrote a political text entitled *Ājñāpatra* in the older tradition and that, even in a place such as Thailand, political works were written in the earlier political tradition rooted in India. As for the legal literature, more than 150 works are supposed to have been written in the last two centuries alone.

However, all of this vast material needs to be critically examined and evaluated from a historically developmental point of view. The challenge is great, as it is in the social, political and legal thought of India that one may find a counter-picture to the still prevalent one that has been developed around the centrality of the renouncer tradition.

Bibliography

For a more detailed exposition of many of the points made in this article, see the author's (1996) book from Oxford University Press, entitled *Problematic and Conceptual Structure of Classical Indian Thought about Man, Society and Polity*.