MODULE 1

POLITICS & POLITICAL SCIENCE

SCRIPT

Introduction:

If by 'political theory' we mean or refer to theories of or about politics, then any attempt to understand the nature and significance of political theory would have to negotiate the concepts of politics as well as of theory. With that general objective before us, the sequence of our discussion will be as follows:

(i)   coming to know what politics and Political Science are about

(ii) defining theory and political theory

(iii) understanding traditional political theory

(iv) understanding the non-traditional alternatives in political theory.

What is 'politics':

The way to understand Political Theory or Political Science, of which the former is an integral part, has to start from an

attempt to understand 'politics' itself, since that is the root-word. But this is not an easy task as the word 'politics' has come to acquire a multiplicity of meanings in the course of its almost 2500 years of history. However, for the sake of our conceptualization, this myriad of meanings can be divided into two broad categories, namely, the formal or the state-centred one and the informal or the power-centred one. This is not to imply, of course, that the state-centred studies stay away from power issues, but just that power is considered in the context of state and its institutions, while the broader informal approach locates power in non-institutional spaces as well.

Both etymology and history had played their parts in the development of the state-centred approach towards politics. The word 'politics' comes from the Greek word 'politika', meaning affairs of the state, via its mid-15th Century Latinized English rendering as 'polettiques'. The usage of the present English form had started from the middle of the 16th Century. In fact, 'politika', the root-word, had itself been derived from another Greek word 'polis', which meant state or a political community. The intimate link between

state and politics was thus linguistically established way back in the past. But the past still lingers in the lexicon.

According to the Collins English Dictionary (2003), 'politics' (noun) refers to *"the practice or the study of the art and science of forming, directing, and administering states and other political units".* One can find a parallel to it in the meaning attributed to 'politics' in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1992, which runs thus: " *politics (noun) --- the art or science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity, such as a nation".*

The defining parameters of such definitions of politics had been the state as concretized through the institution of government and the formal processes of administering the state. People, as such, with the exception of the handful associated with the act of governing, find no place in such definitions. But this does not reflect the reality though. On the other hand, it shows how strong had been the persistence of traditional, pre-democratic ideas about politics. Today one can find the simultaneous existence of

both state-related and non-state politics in practice and as well as in theoretical reflections about them. The democratic transition in the nature of politics, in the sense of increasingly greater popular involvement in it, started towards the end of the 17th century, heralded as it was by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England and made spectacular by the French Revolution, almost a hundred years later. The focus shifted from "the art or science of government or governing" to activities through which more and more people tried to control or influence the acts of governing. With the emergence and development of mass political parties in the 19th century and the growth and proliferation of pressure groups in the 20th, the locus of politics moved out of the domain of the state and its institutions and into the larger social arena. In keeping with the changing times, politics had to redefine itself as a type of activity indulged in by the people at large and having consequences that touch the life of the entire society or, at least, of an overwhelming majority of the people. Politics came to acquire a connotation much wider than the traditional state-centered ones.

Andrew Heywood's definition of politics reflected this changed perspective. Heywood wrote in his *Politics (2002)*, *"Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live"*.

Heywood also proposed that there had been four major perspectives on 'politics', each revealing a particular of area of politics, which, taken as a whole, includes a vast array of institutions, activities and norms. These perspectives are as follows:

i) *politics as the art of government*

ii) *politics as public affairs*

iii) *politics as compromise and consensus*

iv) *politics as power and distribution of resources*

To these four, one may add a fifth one, i.e.

v) *politics as conflict and a means of conflict resolution*

Politics as the art of government:

As discussed earlier, this view of politics had largely been influenced by the etymology of the word 'politics', derived as it were from the Greek words 'politika' and 'polis', both of which concerned the state. So, statecraft or the art of

governing a state came to be considered as the core of politics. Politics took place or people indulged in politics only within the ambits of the state and its governmental institutions. For all practical purposes, politics represented the strategies and tactics of governing as practiced by a minority which had been empowered to do so either by force, tradition or some kind of popular support. The existence of politics outside of this limited sphere of governing could not be conceived of or was not acknowledged. In fact, from the time of the Greek city-states and up to the time when the first wave of democracy hit the embankments of monarchical or oligarchic rule in Europe towards the end of the 17th century politics remained confined within the royal court or the oligarchs' circle. Its main concern lay with achieving perfection in the 'art' or 'science' of governing. The view that politics concerns the state and state-related activities only is, according to Andrew Heywood, "clearly evident in the everyday use of the term: people are said to be 'in politics' when they hold public office, or to be 'entering politics' when they seek to do so."

Limiting politics within the ambit of the state and its institutions gave rise to a narrow and formalistic view of politics. It had dominated the perspective and identified the major concerns of traditional Political Science, which ignored the possibilities of 'politics' being present or taking place in the non-state space in the larger society. It also denied the ordinary masses, i.e. those who were not so-called public functionaries, any role in politics, except as that of a 'subject'. The arrival of the masses into the arena of politics via suffrage, partial at first and gradually becoming universal, and transported by mass political parties and mass movements made politics a social phenomenon, and could bring Political Science out of the narrow confines of exclusively state or government-centric ideas. The process of transformation from 'court' politics to mass politics started in the West from the late 18th century, reaching some kind of an apogee in the '40s and '50s of the 20th century, while its academic reflection could be seen only from the middle of the 20th century.

Politics as public affairs:

By defining politics as public affairs an attempt was made to escape from the constricting world of state and government, and to find a larger identity. But that leads to a new problem, that of delineating the limits of the public world, whose affairs are deemed to be public affairs. 'Public' presupposes the presence of the 'private; public affairs as being distinct from private ones. But, how does one distinguish between the two? One way of going about this task has been to relate public affairs to the "collective organization of community life" (Heywood). From this perspective, the different governmental institutions and organizations that had been primarily endowed with the task of looking after the above-mentioned collective organization constitute the 'public'. Everything else constitutes the 'private'. While state represents the organizational face of the 'public', the elements of the 'private' world have been surmised to be sort of loosely packed into the civil society. Thus, an identification of politics with public affairs reduced the former to be the sole prerogative of the state, while the civil society, by remaining independent and apart from the state (in the Weberian scheme of things) epitomized the 'non-political'.

Civil society in this sense was a non-political platform which accommodated all non-state groups and associations, like family and kinship groups, different community organizations, trade unions and other professional groups, etc.

There were two problems with this kind of division. Firstly, quite a few organizations, like trade unions or different pressure groups, that had been located within the private sphere, involve a large number of people in its activities, serve the interests of many, seek and receive funds from the people, or are just open to public access. In that sense, such organizations are also 'public' in nature, and are yet being kept out of the world of politics. Secondly, it upholds the same narrow legal-formalistic view of politics. This reconceptualization of politics as public affairs does, in no way, represent a significant shift in perspective on politics.

Politics as compromise and consensus:

This view of politics focuses on the functional aspect of politics, i.e. on what politics as an activity seeks to achieve. Politics, as we know, mirrors the society in which it happens

or takes place, and a society had hardly been homogeneous. The degree to which a society is heterogeneous, in the sense of harbouring within itself varied ideas, interests, groups and associations, had changed with times. Generally speaking, the more we had moved ahead in time, society had become more complex. But this variety also creates situations of potential or actual conflicts between and among different ideas, interests, groups or associations, each one of them trying to further its cause.

J.D.B. Miller, in his book, *The Nature of Politics, 1962,* found such conflict to be the root of politics. Miller observed that, "Politics is a natural reflex of the divergences between the members of a society". To Miller, scarcity of essential resources, inequalities in social and legal status, and differences of opinions were the major bases of such divergences in a society. Such conflicts are endemic to every society, and every society, too, develops ways and means of solving a good number of them before they may pose any challenge to social well-being. But, some conflicts, due the intensity of their cause and the extent of their

spread, in terms of number of people involved or area covered, may need to be worked out for a peaceful solution more or less acceptable to the parties to such conflicts. In order that such attempts should be successful there has to be a prior consensus in the society regarding both the need for a negotiated settlement to conflicts that might be threatening to it as well as the *modus vivendi.* The means or the processes by which such a consensus can be reached and compromises worked out have been viewed as 'politics'. This particular perspective on politics has, perhaps, been derived from the state-centred approach to it, because the state remains the final authority which can ensure the development of such a consensus and, also, can take lead to bring on the necessary compromises between and among the conflicting sides. Examples abound in post-independence India when the government of the day had a played a key role in effecting a compromise solution to some really vexing problems, stemming mainly from regional or ethnic issues.

The Rajiv-Longowal Accord to bring an end to the long-standing Punjab problem of the 1980s and the Mizo Accord

can be cases to the point. Political parties too, in order to expand their support bases, try to accommodate on their platform many diverse interests and groups, some of which may be in competition or conflict with each other. This is particularly true in cases of countries with a highly differentiated population as India, where people are divided on the basis of language, religion, caste, regional identity, income level and class, etc. Not to speak of traditionally 'catch-all' parties' like the Indian National Congress, policies and pronouncements of ideology-driven parties, like the two Communist Parties and the Bharatiya Janata Party, even adequately reflect compromises among diverse and often mutually conflicting support groups of such parties.

Politics as power and distribution of resources:

The idea that politics is concerned with power, and, perhaps solely, was introduced to us by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), the Florentine statesman and political thinker. Though temporally straddling two ages, the medieval and the modern, Machiavelli, nonetheless, leaned towards the latter. The country he lived in, i.e. pre-unification Italy, the time he lived through, and the profession he lived by, which

was that of a member of the diplomatic corps of the City-republic of Florence, gave Machiavelli ample opportunity to see 'politics' sans its idealistic coverings. The political history of Italy of his times was replete with incessant warfare between and among the Principalities for domination over others, and a high level of political intrigues and conspiracies within the city-states for acquiring the power to rule. Politics was no longer guided by a notion of a life of justice, good life, or a life according to the scriptures. Politics was solely about power. The 'king', as Machiavelli discovered, really had no 'clothes'. Out of his experiences as a professional diplomat and his insightful reading of the political history of his country were born two of the most significant writings in the history of political thought: *The Prince (1513) and The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius (1521).*

George H. Sabine in his A *History of Political Theory* had essentialized the basic ideas of Machiavelli thus, "The purpose of politics is to preserve and increase political power itself, and the standard by which he judges it is its success in doing this". Sabine had further observed that,

"He *(i.e. Machiavelli)* simply abstracts politics from other considerations and writes of it as if it were an end in itself." To Machiavelli, 'power', of course, meant the political-administrative power of ruling over people, or state-power. Four centuries later, the modern proponents of the power approach in politics gave the concept of power a much-expanded horizon. Taking power as the external manifestation of the capacity to dominate over others and, at the same time, not to be dominated by others, and, also, taking politics to be essentially linked to the pursuit of power, they, thus, find 'politics' in a myriad of social, economic and political situations. As there is politics at the state level, there can be and there is politics within a family as well. One-way of heuristically managing this multiplicity of so-called 'political situations' has been to divide politics into 'governmental' and 'non-governmental' politics. Though power approach is more realistic in the sense that it brings politics out of the confines of the state or the government, and locates it in the nooks and crannies of the society at large, it has, at the same time been criticized for diluting the idea of politics in trying to find a political element even in inter-personal relationship.

The close link between possession of power and the control over resources, both material and non-material renders a political character to the latter also. The scarcity of socially desired goods and services perhaps in all societies and in all times makes the control over resources both a source as well as a manifestation of the power to control others' lives. History shows that in every society those who possess this power have never been very far from political power. This had very amply been reflected in the 1936 publication of Harold Lasswell's seminal work *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* Karl August Wittfogel had also shown in his *Oriental Despotism (1957)* how 'hydraulic empires' maintained a hold over their people by keeping a control over the water resources.

Politics as conflict and as a means of conflict resolution

Relating politics to the control over socially scarce resources logically brings in the issue of conflict over such resources and its resolution. Marxism, the most important strand of the Conflict Theory, looks upon politics as an aspect of a

conflict between two major contending classes in society. Classes are formed primarily with reference to the ownership of the means of production, and the conflict between or among them, in turn, stems from the attempts of the 'have-nots' to wrest such ownership from the hands of the 'haves'. 'Means of production' refers to the resources necessary for production, a large part of which is derived from nature. Inequitable distribution or unequal exploitation of nature's bounty has been a feature of societies coming after the initial period of nomadism. The primary form of the conflict between classes, which we have been talking about, is economic, because, the material means of production constitute an economic element of society. But, this economic class conflict, at a certain stage of its development, acquires a political dimension, as those who owned and controlled the resources were also in control of the state power. So, the conflict over resources turns into a conflict over state power, and that is how it becomes political.

The idea of 'politics' has been open to multiple interpretations, because, politics, over the ages, has

acquired a multi-faceted character. It is, actually, been a congeries of activities, voluntary or otherwise, indulged in by people, in different life situations, in trying to pursue their interests or promote their ideas, the impact of such activities usually touching the lives of other people, may be in other places and in other times. Such activities also involve the question of power, because, the promotion of interests or ideas, or its attempts would either encounter or generate opposition.

'Science' in Political Science

The term 'Political Science' owes its origin to Aristotle, and references to it can be found in his *'Politics'*, written circa 350 BCE. As an example, we may quote the following: *"The end or purpose of every art and science is some good. That of the most authoritative, i.e. of political science, is the greatest and most eagerly desired* good *justice or, in other words, the common welfare."* To Aristotle, of course, science primarily meant the art of managing something or of executing some task. In this case, the art of managing or running the polity was political science. But, much later, science came to mean what it means today, i.e. a particular

way of acquiring and analyzing knowledge, based on empirically observable and verifiable facts, and, still later, Political Science emerged as a discipline, as a subject that studies politics and the political.

But this universal idea of science made the continued use of the term 'science' in Political Science problematic for a number of reasons as given below:

i) Political philosophy, as expressed through the writings of political thinkers from Plato to Rawls, constitutes an important part of Political Science. Philosophies, generally, are not open to empirical investigation, but, can only be reached through an intuitive understanding.

ii) Scientific methodology cannot help us understand or measure values, like equality, liberty or justice, terms with which Political Science is replete.

iii) The nature of politics of every political system is unique, in the sense that it grows out of the history, geography, economy, demography, society, and culture of that system. These elements are neither controllable nor changeable through deliberate human action, thus rendering any experimentation with politics totally

impossible. Experimentation, as we know, is an important part of scientific methodology.

However, the Behavioural Revolution in Political Science of the 1950s introduced the use of statistical tools in the presentation and analysis of political data for theoretical purposes. Politics is an activity indulged in by the people, and this human involvement lends politics a very significant subjective dimension, which inhibits any 'scientific' enquiry.