

Model question and Answer (For 10 Marks &above)

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Q. Discuss the Meaning, Nature and Scope of political science.

Ans. Despite a very old ancestry, Political Science is a discipline in search of its identity. It is partly because the conceptions regarding the meaning, nature and scope of political science have changed from time to time, and partly because the discipline became mature and autonomous only in the latter half of the 20th century. For example, Aristotle, the father of political science, considered it as the ‘master Science’ and defined its scope to include socio-political institutions. With the distinction made by the political scientists between the state and society, and with the emergence of other social sciences, political science became the “science of the state” with emphasis on its institutional arrangements like the government. Thereafter, political science shifted their focus of enquiry from the institutional apparatus to the human motives and activities as the result of which power and decision-making became the central theme of political science. But this view no longer remains valid today and presently political scientists take a more comprehensive view of political science by equating it with the study of the whole political system.

As is evident from the above discussion, there are three main approaches for understanding the meaning and scope of political science. They are:

- a. Institutional Approach**
- b. Functional Approach**
- c. System Approach**

The Institutional Approach: The main characteristic of the approach is its concern for the study of the State and its institutional paraphernalia. Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Green, Bentham, Mill, Marx etc. are the main proponents of the institutional approach. These great political thinkers not only studied the state and government as they existed in their time but also proscribed what they ought to be on the basis of their philosophical intuition. For example, Plato, in his book, “The Republic”, talks about the “ideal state” which should be ruled by the “philosophical kings”. His disciple Aristotle, in his famous book, ‘The

Polity”, depicts the “Best Practicable State” with a list of governments. But it is actually Machiavelli who used for the first time the term “state” in its true sense and defined it as an autonomous association with its own morality and mode of operation. Thereafter, Hobbes in his book ‘The Leviathan’, preferred an absolute monarchical state to anarchy and chaos, but his countrymen and successor John Locke favored a limited democratic state so as to realize man’s natural rights. Rousseau, contractualists like Hobbes and Locke views that state best which is governed by the “General Will”.

According to Hegel, the German idealist, ‘the state is march of God on earth”, but for T. H .Green, the state is there to hinder the hindrances to individual freedom. The English utilitarian like Bentham, J.S.Mill consider “that state best which governs the least”, the Marxist writers on the contrary, view it as a class institution which will ‘wither away” with the establishment of a classless society by the proletariat (working class).

Taking a cue from these great political thinkers, some modern political scientists like Bluntschli, Garner, Gettel, Gilchrist, Leacock, Laski, Paul Janet, Seeley, Willoughby etc. attached great significance to the study of the state and government and understood political science as the ‘science of the state”(Gettel) or describes it as that study which “begins and ends with the state” (Garner). They not only studied the different stages of the evolution of the state, the function that it should perform and the norm it should follow but also analyzed those political institutions like, Legislature, Executive, Judiciary, Civil Service, Local Institutions etc. which helped the state to fulfill its ends. But they confined themselves only to the outer contours of these institutional arrangements and seldom cared to look into the non-formal institutions, such as the political parties, pressure groups etc. or the informal institutions like the public opinion.

Besides, the political institutions, the modern political scientists also looked into those philosophical issues such as law, liberty, equality, justice, sovereignty etc. which closely conditioned the functional pattern of these institutions. Moreover, for their study of these institutions or issues, they used the methods such as philosophical imagination, deductive logic and reference to historical background. However the institutional approach has been severely criticized because of the following reasons:

1. It reduced political enquiry to an idea of the state/government interpreted as body of formal constitutional norms by converting political science to an arid legal formalism that turned away entirely from the social reality.
2. It did not help us to distinguish governmental/political institutions from other kinds and we are left for this at the mercy of our intuitions.
3. It did not provide a conducive scope for theory-building.

The Functional Approach: Dissatisfied with the institutional approach due to its theoretical limitations, it is hardly surprising that efforts were made to develop alternative explanations on the major variables of political science by identifying its subject-matter as a kind of activity, behavior or in a loose sense function rather than the state or the government organs. Although some definitions of this kind originated in the 19th century, it is only in the middle of the twentieth century that they have finally come to be accepted as an approach superior to the institutional one. However, this approach is divided into two because while some of its proponents consider “power” others view “decision-making as the paramount concern of political science. Now we would analyze these variants individually.

- **Power-** Karl Marx, Treitschke, Gumplowicz, Ratzeinholer, Oppenheimer etc. are some of the early proponents of this school who saw state not as a body of legal norms but as a set of social groups in eternal competition for power over its instrumentalities. By the early 1930's Catlin, Merriam, Lasswell and Kaplan argued that in every society positions of power are very limited whereas those who aspire them are numerous. As a result, there goes on a perpetual struggle for them. Persons outside the power circle are always trying to grab them, while those inside the circle are always busy in retaining them. The limited number of these positions, apart from their society-wide relevance, coupled with the immense socio-economic and political benefits that accrue from them, further make the game of politics much more complicated and interesting. In these days of mass action, political battles are seldom waged single handedly. Instead, contender plan strategies, negotiate bargains, build coalitions, mobilize mass action, hatch conspiracies and resort to all sort of means, both fair and foul, in order to achieve their goal of power. Thus, without remaining confined to a few individuals, the game of power engulfs the whole society and generates a community-wide interest. So these

scholars conclude that the present day political science revolves primarily around the problem of the attainment, consolidation and distribution of political power.

However, notwithstanding the great merits of this school, it has been criticized because of the following grounds.

1. Power is a very ambiguous concept and therefore has definitional problem.
2. Conflicts over control take place in all areas of life not just the political sphere.
3. Political interaction involves more than just the pursuit of power.

➤ **Decision-Making-**Towards the middle of the 20th century, there appeared an important and popular variation on the theme of power as the central focus of political science. According to this school, power attains significance because it leads control over the processes through which public decisions are made and put into effect. This interpretation was quickly absorbed into the discipline of political science. It has led to the direct interpretation of political life as a set of relationship through which public decisions or policies are formulated and implemented. Power as a component recedes into the background, as just one possible determinant of decisions.

The beginning of this approach was first made by Carl Schmitt of Germany and it was soon popularized by the organizational theorists of the USA in the 1940s after which its general significance for political analysis and research became apparent. However, this approach has been criticized on the ground that decisions, like power, are characteristics of all other spheres of life as well. Similar decisional behavior occurs in organization such as trade unions, corporations, churches and families as well as in the political system. Thus, the mere definition of political science as the study of decision-making provides little guidance in differentiating political decisions from other kinds of decisions.

The System Approach: On the whole, the efforts at describing the meaning and scope of political science either by the institutionalisms or by the functionalists have been less than successful because it covered only a limited sphere of politics. With a view to give a wider connotation to politics. A new approach called the systems approach developed in the political science by some leading American political scientists like David Easton, Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell who use the concept “Political System” to analyze both the formal and informal

aspects of politics. Thus, the modern scholars take a very comprehensive view of political science by equating it with the study of whole political system.

Easton defines “political system” as that set of interactions through which ‘authoritative allocation of values’ are made and implemented for a society. According to him, society of goods and services prevails in all societies and the limitless demand for the same calls upon the society to develop a mechanism to authoritatively allocate these goods and services to all the needy persons. The society does it through political system. But the question is: authoritative allocation of values also takes place in other kinds of organization like the family, church, trade union and corporation not just in the political system. The answer lies with the fact that what separates political allocations from other kinds is that political allocations are normally accepted as binding by most members of the society whether or not the members themselves are actually affected by them. In other words, political allocations are societal in their scope and implications. It is because of this kind and the functions they fulfil for a society that formal and special sanctions such as the use of force, are often associated with them.

But the conceptualization of political science should not neglect the fact that the other kinds of organizations where authoritative allocation of values takes place are equally important because the investigation of their internal processes will immeasurably help us in our understanding of the similar processes within the societal political system. This is because of two reasons-

- i. In most societies such groups help to influence the way in which binding decisions are made, their formulation, content and implementation.
- ii. These organizations and social units look very much like political systems, the comparative study of which might help us to shed light on the political processes of the broader society. But recognition of their relevance for political research is entirely different from equating them with the political system.

The authoritative allocation of values for the society, if closely looked at, is quite a comprehensive concept. It involves a multidimensional ongoing process, involving power, authority, conflict, consensus and above all the dynamics of decision making. Furthermore, the decision makers become all important when they are required to employ force and coercion against those who refuse to abide by them.

Thus, the meaning and scope of political science has become more and more comprehensive over the years. They have had a cumulative effect of enriching the discipline of political science.

The Nature of Political Science

Political science by its very nature is both normative and empirical. It is normative because of its concern with the political values and it is empirical because of its emphasis on the factual analysis of the political phenomena. This dual characteristic of political science has become a reality due to:

- a) The very nature of the political phenomena and
- b) The capacity of the political observer to analyze those phenomena “objectively”.

Some political scientists are of the view that a truly scientific theory of politics is impossible given the nature of human behavior, both individually and in groups. The grounds for such a standpoint are:

- I. Human actions are basically unpredictable,
- II. Political situations are too complex for scientific analysis to be able to discover, let alone measure all the variables in the process, and
- III. Observer’s biases are inevitable and what passes for observations is often only a reflection of these biases.

While recognizing some merits of the viewpoint, there are some other scholars who realize the need to understand politics better and especially to discover some broad regularity even if these do not constitute truly “scientific laws”. To take a few examples: there has been much interest in examining the relationship between electoral systems and party systems or the socio-economic conditions under which liberal democracy is likely to emerge and be stable, or which system, parliamentary or presidential, is likely to result in more effective government.

Regularities which may be discovered in this way will be useful for generalization and prediction.

Both the views are supported by the best traditions of political science. On the one hand, we have Plato’s concept of “dual state”, Rousseau’s suggestion of restoration of a sense of community

and man's moral and emotional needs, Bentham's idea of happiness as the basis of political action as example of normative suggestions. On the other, the well known advice of political change and revolutions and the concept of "mixed constitutions" that we find in Aristotle's "politics" is based on the factual analysis and companion of various kinds of constitutions. Karl Marx's massive analysis that has proved so influential both academically and politically presents the best example of a synthesis of two views. Similarly, the political science that existed up to the Second World War was normative in character but with the emergence of the Behavioral revolution, the discipline became more factual and scientific. However, the post-behavioural revolution which started in the 1960s combined both the viewpoints and made political science normative and empirical simultaneously.

In nutshell, it could be said that Political science, as a discipline, is mostly engaged with the study of followings:

1. The study of state;
2. The study of Government;
3. The study of both state and government; and
4. The study of non-political process.
