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Public policy in the context of Liberal State

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INTRODUCTION

The study of public policy is more than a science. Public is a collective and policy is the decision of the government regarding the public, taken after thorough procedures with the aim of the welfare of the public. But under different kinds of state, the environment of policy making is also different. The nature of the environment influences the context in which the state operates and it dictates the nature of the policy making, implementing process and whether or not the larger public will be included in its evaluation.

Former US President, Woodrow Wilson believed that running a constitution was as important as making it and thus, public policy and its analysis became an important part of public administration. There had been a long standing contention between public policy making and the involvement of state in the process. The politics-administration dichotomy dictated the state make policies and the administration only implement them. But in the contemporary context, it is the administration, which through the inputs from civil society, human rights organisations, NGOs, PIL/judiciary, initiates policies and policy changes. In the liberal context, the modern state and its role were confined to law and order, policing and tax and revenue collection and the role of state actors played in policy formulation and implementation was completely ignored

Theda Skocpol recounts in her work, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies Of Analysis In Current Research", a renewed interest of scholars in the role of state in instituting comprehensive political change, shaping economic development and bargaining with multi-national corporations. There was a change in the way state was being viewed and from the liberal perspective of state, a welfare state perspective was coming in, where the role of state was being enhanced to incorporate more functions.

Liberal conception of state:

The liberal state has been interpreted in different ways by different thinkers depending upon the environment in the political system which existed at their time. The separation of society from the state came about under the liberal constitutional model. Herein, the kind of freedoms that civil society enjoyed underwent a drastic change given the emergence of market economy.

Political economy had acquired new dimensions, and they were being interpreted and defined

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by thinkers in the way they were existing in times contemporaneous to them.

The liberal conception of state dates back to the Glorious Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, wherein Locke propounded negative liberty and the three Natural Rights, right to life, liberty and property as a man's inalienable rights. These rights could not be infringed upon by the sovereign ruling authority. Roger King finds the notion of modern state which is paradoxically linked to the public realm yet formally and analytically distinct from the rest of the society. This typically means that the relationship of the state with the individuals, as perceived by the individuals, is premised upon command and authority and obedience to the state. The authority exercised by political leaders exists as long as people believe in its legitimacy and the legitimacy of the socio-economic order this authority serves to perpetuate. Decision making at the legislative, judicial and administrative levels, became formal, free from personal rules and kinship ties.

This builds upon the Hobbesian social contract where it was every citizen's moral obligation to obey the commands of the sovereign in return for the protection, he was providing them. Locke and Montesquieu, considered the limits on state power as more pronounced since they believed that the relationship that the individuals had with the state was only one of the rest of their associations. They believed that the state should not have extensive claims over the individual's life. Liberal constitutionalism seemed to be more compatible with that branch of representation which resembled the democratic system of liberty, which worked to safeguard the private sphere from arbitrary government interference. But it recoils from the idea that the majority can make sound decisions for itself and presses for professionalism in public services. The professional groups within the government thus, work to prevent irrational political interference in provision of services to the citizenry and their protection from state tyranny. The Neo-pluralist school of thought finds this professional safeguard which protects administration from external control of elected officials, better than traditional democratic accountability. Liberalism introduced an element of protection of administrative services from instabilities, inertia and irrationalities in public policy that stem from political intervention.

A down side of liberal constitutionalism, has been that due to the decline of the state in dominating the policy process, the lassies-faire economy has been working only to advance the interests of the Bourgeoisie class, which is the dominant class in society where the all the power rests. The curtailment of state from the realm of redistribution and allocation resources has resulted in the policy process working to keep certain sections out of the ambit of opportunities and resources that they require to live a decent life.

Three major challenges were being faced by western democracies in the 20th century in the public sector. First, was structural debt. Second was the decline of political control over the economy due to globalisation and third, the scheme of redistribution of goods that excluded certain groups from the ambit of mainstream opportunities, thereby creating privileged minorities.

Two models to explain the working of the liberal model are elite model and group model or the pluralist model.

Group Theory/Pluralist Theory:

Individuals who share common interests tend to come together, formally or informally to advocate their demands to the state. Individuals become an important part of politics when they act on behalf of a group's interest. This group acts as a bridge between the individual and the state and Thomas Dye believes that the struggle among groups to influence public policy, is what politics is all about. Central to this model, is the practice of interaction among groups being a critical ingredient in politics. This interaction tends to impact policy mostly at the formulation stage.

The political system manages the conflict between these groups by establishing rules, arranging compromises by negotiating between the varied and diverse interests and enacting and enforcing these balanced compromises in the form of public policy. The locus of power in society, at any given

point, rests with the group that succeeds in establishing its supremacy over the others. Therefore, the power to determine policy also keeps shifting and simultaneously the direction of the policy process also changes. Latham argues that public policy is actually a temporary point of equilibrium that is reached in the course of struggle between the groups. So, when the equilibrium point gets altered in favour of another group, either new policies emerge and replace the old ones or older policies undergo modifications. State usually acts as a referee in such situations as it encourages competition between the powerful groups in society.

In a plural society, the dynamics of the policy process are much more vibrant and fiercer than in a homogeneous one because here, group solidarity and power play a key role in Formulation, Implementation and Evaluation processes. The ability of a single group to remain in power and tilt policy in its favour depends on factors like wealth, organisational skills, leadership qualities, bargaining skills, access to decision makers and luck. Wealth is important for mobilising resources since influencing policies requires money. Organisation skills in bringing together all the stakeholders in the policy process. Strong leadership helps push the agenda further, even in the absence of strong political connections, it can, the very least, ensure access to politicians.

In plural societies power rests with the people only when they have the chance to vote between parties during the elections. State only moves the way the groups want it to and it produces public policy based on the inputs to receives from them. Since coalitions with varied interests come to power, they influence public policy so greatly thus exposing the multiple pressures a democratic government is usually under.

Dahl has remarked that a good thing about the pluralist or group model is that no one group can stay in power consistently or have full monopoly over the resources. Therefore, the point of equilibrium continues to shift, hence, it is temporary in nature. This happens because groups manipulate the resources to get policies framed or modified in their favour. Building coalitions is a key tactic used in politics, which allows even the less dominant group to temporarily have their say. Those who get membership of dominant groups or form them usually hail from a military background, the business class or are bestowed upon these powerful positions due to dynastic rule even in democracies.

Group theory in its analysis of the policy process tends to leave out the role that single individuals can play in the determining the shape that policies will take. This phenomenon can exist in both, democratic and autocratic societies, where the interests of one single person take precedence in the policy process.

Elite Model:

Elite theory posits that society has been divided into two classes: bourgeoisie or the elites and the proletariat or the common people. The power lies with the elite or the economically dominant class. It believes that 'power lies with masses' and that 'public policy is a reflection of the demands of the people' are actually myths. However, the major challenge the elite classes in a capitalist society face is from socialism.

Policy making and implementation is largely a downward process which flows from the elites to the masses, instead of arising from the demands of the masses. The elite model suggests that the masses are apathetic and ill-informed about public policy, which provides the elite class with the opportunity to form the policy opinions of the masses. Therefore, public policy reflects the preferences and interests of the elite, which are then implemented by the administrators.

The bourgeoisie along with the military and politicians control all policies of the state. This builds upon the pluralistic model that emerges from the group model and posits that the decision making framework lies in the hands of the powerful groups that control the government. Mosca called this minority a privileged one and referred to the middle classes as sub-elites because he believed that

even they exercised influence within the policy process, at least to some extent. Since the minorities are smaller groups, it is easy for them to organise themselves and advocate their demands, eventually leading to having strong influences on public policy.

Robert Dye discusses the implications of elite theory for policy analysis. The very existence of the phenomenon of elitism means that public policy doesn't reflect the demands of the masses, but the elite classes. Hence, whenever public policies undergo changes and innovations, they are brought about by the elites themselves by redefining their own values. Robert Dye notes that this change is incremental rather than drastic to ensure perpetuation of the system and more importantly, avoid a revolutionary overthrow of the system by the masses. The incremental theory also posits that public policies are usually modified and rarely replaced. Change in the nature of the political system occurs only when a threat is perceived by the elite to their hegemony. Only then do they enact reforms to maintain status quo and ensure smooth functioning of the system. Dye also suggests that elitism doesn't necessarily make public policy hostile towards the welfare of the masses. It means that the responsibility of the welfare of the masses lies with the elite and not the masses.

Next, Dye argues that elitism views the masses as collectively passive, ill-informed and apathetic. The collective sentiment of the masses is influenced by the values if the elite, hence, communication between these two entities always flows downwards from the elites to the masses. Popular elections and party competition don't allow the masses to take an active part in governance. Hence, most policy decisions are influenced by the masses indirectly, via elections where parties due to the electoral competition provide alternatives to policies that the general public has been unhappy with. This can also take the form elected officials instituting policy changes after coming to power.

The elite theory asserts that the elites are usually in a consensus about the fundamental norms, rules and values that govern the social system and also on the continuation of the social system. Therefore, only those policy alternatives that fall within the ambit of this consensus are considered. The elitist model doesn't deny the existence of competition between the elites themselves. But this competition is centred on a very narrow range of issues that they mostly agree on, rather than disagreeing.

Critical Evaluation:

Dunleavy and O'Leary find the elite model as converging with the Instrumentalist Marxist accounts. Both posit that business corporations extensively control party operations, interest group process and mass media coverage of politics. The state policy is tightly controlled by capitalists to ensure business profitability and to ensure that ordinary citizens do not get to exercise any genuine control over the decision making process. They also share their critique of pluralism since the believe that elites from a narrow social background and shared valued man the state apparatus.

Elite theory in its turn, overlaps with the Neo-pluralist school of thought. Both share their belief in the arrangements of liberal corporatists and technocratic government having displaced representative government in determining public policies. Both schools view corporatism as fascism with no human face and believe that technocratic system is the arena where the state elites implement their own preferences rather than societal demands.

Elite theory argues that the political leaders and policy level administrators have complex and multifarious preference structures. Whenever these state personal come into conflict with the external social interests, it is usually the internal state interests that prevail in policy formulation and dictate the detailed development of policy.

Policy analysts see these processes as detrimental for the welfare of the larger society, since the role of masses is completely neglected. Society becomes a battle field where all these groups keep fighting for power and resources and control and under special circumstances these groups form coalitions or come together. The liberal state completely ignores its individual, in the name of right to

liberty but the other two rights, namely right to life and right to property get jeopardised in the process.

Rousseau and other proponents of positive liberty considered the state as an entity that will help individual realise his true potential and function from his higher self. And in the modern government with the coming in of civil society groups, state has been pushed to take up bigger roles in matters concerning an individual's private life. The distinction between public and private becomes fuzzy when the state is forced to provide access to basic healthcare, education and housing to its people, by taking those out of the hands of the private players. Policy processes dominated by the New Right now witness greater central control over housing, education and healthcare and other public services that were earlier in the hands of private players. This was a pattern visible in the western societies in the 1980s. The state was increasingly called as the welfare state since it had to intervene to improve conditions of life for the masses.

In countries like India, in the immediate post independent period, state control was highly centralised in all sectors, even then some groups managed to control the policies like FICCI, but mostly socialist principles were to be followed. With the coming in of privatisation, state did not allow for the corporate firms to have big role in policy process. But in the current scenario in India, a few individuals seem to play the biggest role and have immense influence on the policy process, where most policies are formed to cater to their self-interest.

Conclusion:

The policy analysis of the liberal state shows that the lassies faire model is not entirely suitable in the socio-economic and political context of the changing times. The liberal state tends to ignore the masses in the view of furthering the interests of a few highly privileged minority groups. Therefore, welfare state model is the one that is more suitable for such complex times but that isn't without its own loopholes because people who have the resources and power end up controlling the policy process any way.

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