

Plato's Communism, Contemporary Problems, and Indian Wisdom

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The philosophical roots of Communism stretch back to ancient Greece, to Plato's *Republic*. In this work, Plato gave voice to the thought of his teacher Socrates — already executed by then for allegedly corrupting the youth and sowing impiety.

PLATO'S COMMUNISM

The interests of the state and society are neglected by rulers whose sense of duty is often weakened by personal attachments. In Indian lore, this blindness to *dharma* due to family and property ties, finds its archetype in Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana. Ancient Indian sages have long pointed out that affection and passion (*rāga*) can infect even great men, diminish and pull them down. Thus:

*“Through that (rāga) diseased, (tena āturāḥ)
diminished men fall-perish. (kṣīṇa-lokāḥ cyavante)”* [Mu i.2:9b]

For Plato (c. 400 BCE), speaking in the voice of Socrates, the problem lay on the one hand, in the inability of a ruler to ‘sight the Truth’, and his identification with family and property, rather than with state and society, on the other. His answer? A communism of philosophers as kings.

A Communism of Rulers

Plato's was not a communism of the entire populace, but of the ruling class alone. The masses would live in ordinary, propertied family units under the laws of the state. Laws were to be made by Rulers. Divested at birth from family, denied property by law, the rulers would be spiritually uplifted and educated to protect the interest of society and state. They were therefore — the “Guardians.” Some, called Auxiliaries, guarded the society-state with valour, while others called Philosophers, guided it with wisdom

Plato conceived of communism as an efficient means for infusing social interest and purpose into rulers. It relied on negative and a positive component. The negating part was divestment of all ties to family and property. The positive component was an education oriented towards spiritual ‘sight’, nurturing philosopher-kings.

Philosopher-rulers with ‘Sight’ of Truth

Who, for Plato, counted as a philosopher? They were lovers of the *sight of Truth* — not of mere opinion, but with ‘sight’, a direct *inner vision (pratyakṣa-darśana)*. Because of this faculty, philosophers alone were fit to rule. Thus, Plato said:

“(A) guardian who is to keep anything should have eyes rather than no eyes ... having perfect vision of the other world to order the laws ... to guard and preserve the order of them ...” [Plato 6: 484(3)].

Truth was Absolute, the Doctrine Totalitarian

A direct perception of Truth was implied. Absolute being was knowable and philosophers had the ‘knowledge of Being’. They loved ‘the truth in each thing’, in contrast to those who had ‘opinions’ about things that had ‘the nature of being and not-being’. Since in Truth, Being conforms to its form, Plato argued that:

“philosophers ... are able to grasp the eternal and unchangeable” while others “wander in the region of the many and variable” [Plato 6:484(2)].

Thus, Philosopher-rulers had the last word on everything. They would administer not only justice but also aesthetics (beauty) and ethics (goodness). ‘Truth’ in all its aspects would be legislated. In this sense, Plato’s communism of rulers was totalitarian.

Dictatorial and Egalitarian

Platonic communism was also dictatorial but inclined to egalitarianism for viability.

Democracy, for Plato, was essentially flawed: it empowered property-bound, family driven ‘self-interested’ masses, whose materialism, selfishness and greed would deny space to the interests of society and state. Finding appeal in baser instincts, those without merit would rise to power and displace Philosopher-rulers. This would eclipse Truth itself.

Thus, a dictatorship of Philosopher-communists seemed the only safeguard — but sustainable only if the people did not turn against it. Plato noted two historic causes of rebellion in Greece: inequality and deprivation. He therefore favoured private property for the masses, but without extreme inequality, and may have presumed that philosopher-kings would guard against poverty.

Critical Examination of Platonic Communism

It is startling — even shocking, that so early in Western history, a spectre emerged that was both totalitarian and universalistic — a spectre that haunts the world even today. Due to this contemporaneity, it is worth taking a closer critical look.

Two questions can be asked: Is there an absolute universal truth? Should such truth be legislated for all society?

A Static and Universalistic Vision

Plato's Absolute Truth was static and universalistic. It excluded 'intermediate flux' — 'riddles' that had the ambiguity of 'being or not-being'¹ — rejecting the dynamic in the manifest world in favour of a spiritual truth conceived in the sight-vision of philosophers. Philosophers saw forms that conformed to the Being of things — since Being lacked flux, so too did legislated Truth. It was Absolute. And the Absolute truth being universal, it was for All.

Its Modern Echo

This static and universalistic vision of Truth continues to shape Western popular thought, its largely unacknowledged Platonic taproot layered over and obscured by centuries of varied and conflicting intellectual tradition. It drives most prevailing perceptions of justice, ethics and aesthetics. Even DEI sentiments instead of being confined to compassion find and exercise their social and statist force in universalism — in the belief that “what is true for some is true for all, and for all time.”

This is the belief system that is rewriting history, psychology and social relations today. And by doing so, it is eroding the depth and holding strength of Time in society and individuals. Obstinate and inexorably, this misplaced vision is inviting the end of Time.

This is the spectre that haunts the world today. And it has ancient origins.

INDIA — FLUX, DIVERSITY AND SACRED DESIGN

In sharp contrast, the ancient wisdom of India accommodated diversity and change within an ordering that put divine Truth at the top.

¹ Plato 5:477(61) & 478(63), 480. Also “The individual objects of which I am speaking are also a riddle, and have a double sense: nor can you fix them in your mind, either as being or not-being, or both, or neither” ... “being the intermediate flux” ... [ibid., 5:479(66)].

Flux and Diversity are Essential to Being

The *ṛṣis* of Aṅgiras tradition saw that manifest Being was dynamic in origin and diverse. The imperishable Brahman — *bhūtayonim*, the womb of Being — is both *nityam* (unchanging, eternal) and *vibhum sarva-gatam* (all-pervading motion of all) [Mu i.1:6]. From this imperishable source arise *vividhāḥ bhāvāḥ* — diverse dispositions and meanings. [Mu ii.1:1]. Plurality of Being and Truth is thus essential.

Spirit and Jñāna bridge Divides

However, though Being is plural, Spirit is not. Immersion in pure knowledge or *jñāna* dissolves all differences. So, sages declared that in final beatitude, in the imperishable all become one (*pare avyaye sarve ekī bhavanti*) [Mu iii.2:7]:

*“In which way rivers flowing rapidly into the sea
an end go to — name and form leaving behind —
in that manner, a knower-wise,
from form of name-mark liberated,
to the better-than-best puruṣa, approaches divinely.”* [Mu iii.2:8]

This is the highest state of realisation to which even Advaita points. Thus, at its apex, Indian spirituality dissolves all differences. Seen from these heights, different paths appear to be parallel, if unequal, strivings towards an end to *saṃsāra*. In *mukti*, all paths find their commonality.

Sacred Design at the Pinnacle

Held within the diversity of Being and aloft by most spiritual paths is the sacred design created by *puruṣa*. It is He who sanctions deeds, rewards austerity (*tapas*) and extends *jñāna* to the ignorant [Mu ii.1:6-10]. The divine unembodied *puruṣa* [Mu ii.1:2] is superior to all (*tam eva bhāntam anubhāti sarvaṃ*). Even Brahman, towards which knowers of the soul turn, is attentive to Him [Mu ii.2:9].²

Given a broad consensus over the reverence to be extended to sacred design, even heterodoxies that substantively rejected divine design, usually contained the rejection within their following or philosophical debates. This limited the

² “To the passionless-pure One in a golden preeminent sheath
is Brahman (*hiraṇmaye pare koṣe virajam brahma*).
To the undivided One is That (*niṣkalam tat*).
To the shining-clear One as the light of lights (*śubhram jyotiṣām jyotiḥ*),
That — to which are knowers of the soul — is attentive. (*tat yat ātma-vidah viduḥ*)”
[Mu ii.2:9]

spillover of spiritual conflict into open social strife. Massacres like the St. Bartholomew Day's were little known to India before the thousand-year invasion. Thus, the actual practice of all sects conceded that —“what was true for some was not true for all”— even if the theory of some claimed universality. In Indic thought, practice was not universalistic, even if theory was.

Resolving Tensions in Jñāna and for Realisation

Thus, the invariable tension between essential diversity and sacred design was ideally resolved by *jñāna* and the parallel pursuit of self-realisation. This lesson was learnt at great cost at the time of *dakṣa yajña*, when the teachings of Viṣṇu and to a lesser extent Śiva — fell on unheeding ears. It is worth recalling the counsel of the two great gods..

Śiva's Counsel

There was a time when Dakṣa publicly banned Śiva from *yajñas* ‘for transgressing *varṇa* discipline’, and excommunicated his followers for clinging to heretical doctrines. In reaction, dubbing this as ‘brāhminical rashness’, Nandin cursed brahmins for being greedy, desirous of heaven and deluded [Tagare: 5-6].

At this Śiva intervened and cautioned Nandin against anger at brahmins — ‘who are always our elders and preceptors’, ‘devoted to vedas’, and who are self-realised due to the power of vedic hymns. He enjoined Nandin to ‘avoid the concept of diversity’, realise that all were *ātman* and thereby manage anger through *jñāna* — the knowledge of true reality. [ibid.]

On his part, Viṣṇu who was bound to protect *yajñas* tried to explain to Dakṣa that without Śiva or Īśvara, holy rites alone were inefficacious, remaining fettered by *karma* and that Śiva alone led *yajñas* beyond the three *guṇas* [ibid. 19-20]. The failure of Dakṣa supporters to heed Viṣṇu led to calamity — but the broader Indic tradition learned the lesson.

Since then, Indian civilisation has upheld countless paths guiding diverse dispositions and meanings to the Supreme goal, coexisting with reverence for the sacred design — occasional conflicts notwithstanding.

References

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