

The Origins of Kingship



Both India and China had a concept of a golden age in the remote past that provided a model for later governments and peoples to emulate. This passage from the famous Indian epic known as the Mahabharata describes a three-stage process in the evolution of government in human society. Yudhisthira (yoo-dis-THY-ruh) and Bhishma (BIHSH-muh) are two of the main characters in the story.

The Mahabharata

Yudhisthira said: “This word ‘king’ [*raja*] is so very current in this world, O Bharata; how has it originated? Tell me that, O grandfather.”

Bhishma said: “Currently, O best among men, do you listen to everything in its entirety—how kingship originated first during the golden age [*krtayuga*]. Neither kingship nor king was there in the beginning, neither scepter [*danda*] nor the bearer of a scepter. All people protected one another by means of righteous conduct, O Bharata, men eventually fell into a state of spiritual lassitude. Then delusion overcame them. Men were thus overpowered by infatuation, O leader of men, on account of the delusion of understanding; their sense of righteous conduct was lost. When understanding was lost, all men, O best of the Bharatas, overpowered by infatuation, became victims of greed. Then they sought to acquire what should not be acquired. Thereby, indeed, O lord, another vice, namely, desire, overcame them. Attachment then attacked them, who had become victims of desire. Attached to objects of sense, they did not discriminate between what should be said and what should not be said, between the edible and inedible and between right and wrong. When this world of men had been submerged in dissipation, all spiritual knowledge [*brahman*] perished; and when spiritual knowledge perished, O king, righteous conduct also perished.”

When spiritual knowledge and righteous conduct perished, the gods were overcome with fear, and fearfully sought refuge with Brahma, the creator. Going to the great lord, the ancestor of the worlds, all the gods,

afflicted with sorrow, misery, and fear, with folded hands said: “O Lord, the eternal spiritual knowledge, which had existed in the world of men, has perished because of greed, infatuation, and the like, therefore we have become fearful. Through the loss of spiritual knowledge, righteous conduct also has perished, O God. Therefore, O Lord of the three worlds, mortals have reached a state of indifference. Verily, we showered rain on earth, but mortals showered rain [religious offerings] up to heaven. As a result of the cessation of ritual activity on their part, we faced a serious peril. O grandfather, decide what is most beneficial to use under these circumstances.”

Then, the self-born lord said to all those gods: “I will consider what is most beneficial; let your fear depart, O leaders of the gods.”

Thereupon he composed a work consisting of a hundred thousand chapters out of his own mind, wherein righteous conduct [*dharma*], as well as material gain [*artha*] and enjoyment of sensual pleasures [*kama*] were described. This group, known as the threefold classification of human objectives, was expounded by the self-born lord; so, too, a fourth objective, spiritual emancipation [*moksha*], which aims at a different goal, and which constitutes a separate group by itself.

Then the gods approached Vishnu, the lord of creatures, and said: “Indicate to us that one person among mortals who alone is worthy of the highest eminence.” Then the blessed lord god Narayana reflected, and brought forth an illustrious mind-born son, called Virajas [who, in this version of the origins of the Indian state, became the first king].



What is the author's purpose here? How does this vision compare with other views in the ancient world on the reasons for the emergence of political leadership? What differences and similarities do you see between this description and the portrayal of kingship in Egypt in Hymn to the Pharaoh in Chapter 1?

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