
UNIT 5 NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Many forces shattered the ideal of a monolithic united Christian order. The growth of commerce made possible by economic development, the growth of cities, the rise of the printing press, the changeover from a barter economy to money and banking, new scientific and geographical discoveries, emergence of centralised states with a distinctive national language, a new respect for scientific explorations, crystallisation of humanistic philosophy, demographic changes and the rise of a secular order were some of the key determining forces. The emergence of universities ended the monopoly of the church over education and with increasing literacy and the revival of human spirit during the Renaissance, individualism and humanism came to the forefront. Buckhardt remarked that the core of the Renaissance was the new man, with prime concern of glory and fame replacing religious faith and asceticism with self-realisation and the joy of living.

Laski commenting on this extraordinary change asserted that the entire Renaissance was in the writings of Machiavelli who portrayed the new character of the state by comprehending the intricacies of statecraft in which decisions reflected the political compulsions rather than religious precepts and what ought to be. Machiavelli is the father of political realism with the primacy to the real world of politics.

5.2 MACHIAVELLI: A CHILD OF HIS TIME

Born in the year 1469 in Florence (Italy) Machiavelli belonged to an affluent family and was well educated for a public career. At a young age he attained one of the higher posts in the government of Florence. Later he was sent on a diplomatic mission to several foreign countries where he acquired first hand experience of political and diplomatic matters. However, political upheavals in the Florentine Republic caused the fall in the career of Machiavelli in 1513, and he was even put to a year's imprisonment. He was released from prison by the influence of his political friends on condition that he would retire from political life and refrain from all political activities. It was during this period of forced retirement that he induced his most

memorable literary works out of which the "Prince" and the "Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius" stand out most prominently. Their contents spelt out his political thought and earned him notoriety such as indifference to the use of *immoral means* to achieve political purposes and the belief that government depended largely on *force and craft*. His writings are mainly influenced by the then prevailing situation which half the time was the battle ground of conspirators and ambitious politicians—local as well as foreign. The public leaders were activated more by selfish motive than by public interest. Public morality was very low, the Papal authority in Italy constituted greatly towards political degradation. Popes were opposed to the unification of Italy, which was divided into five states viz. the Kingdom of Naples in the south, the Duchy of Milan in north-west, the aristocratic Republic of Venice in the north-east, and the Republic of Florence and the Papal state in the centre. The Catholic Church and the clergy of Machiavelli's time wanted to maintain a shadow of their spiritual power over whole of Italy, which left Italy in a state of arrested development. There was no power which appeared great enough to unite the whole of Italian peninsula. Italians suffered all the degradation and oppression of the worst type of tyranny and the land became a prey to the French, Spanish and the Germans. And, unlike other European countries none of the rulers of Italian states was able to consolidate the whole of Italy under their sway. The political situation in Italy was embarrassingly complex and depressing; and Machiavelli as a patriotic Italian could not help being overwhelmingly moved by that. Securing the independence of Italy and restoring prosperity of its cities became a master passion with him. The unification of the entire country under one national monarch on the model of France and Spain was the ideal for Machiavelli which particularly inspired him. If the rotten politics of Italy affected his thought, he was also influenced by the growing spirit of Renaissance which impelled men to re-examine things from other than the clerical point of view. Being the chief exponent of this school of thought, Machiavelli, according to Dunning, "stood on the borderline between the Middle Ages and the Modern Ages. He ushered in the Modern Age by ridding politics of the vassalage of religion."

5.3 METHODS OF MACHIAVELLI'S STUDY

As to the spiritual ancestry of Machiavelli the great Greek philosopher Aristotle held his imagination. Machiavelli quietly put aside the Church's scriptures, the teachings of Church fathers and the conflict for supremacy between the Church and the State. He believed that human nature, and therefore, human problems were almost the same at all times and places, and so the best way of enlightening the present, according to him, was possible with the help of the past. Thus, Machiavelli's methods, like that of Aristotle, was historical. But, it was more so in appearance than in substance and reality. He was more concerned with the actual working of the governmental machinery than the abstract principles of constitution. A realist in politics his writings expound a theory of the art of government rather than a theory of State. The actual source of his speculation was the interest he felt in the men and conditions of his own time. He was an accurate observer and acute analyst of the prevailing circumstances. He, therefore, adopted a form and method of political philosophy which ignored completely the scholastic and juristic ideals. He adopted the ancient Greek-Roman philosophy because the Romans had established a well organised empire which the Greeks could not which led him to perceive the true relation between history and politics and it is front history that he drew his conclusions as political truths. His conclusions were reached empirically based on common sense and shrewd political foresight. According to Sabine: "[H]e used history exactly as he used his own observation to illustrate or support a conclusion that he had reached without reference to history." He was a political realist, and like Aristotle he amassed historical facts to overwhelm readers, but his political writings belong less to political theory than to the class of diplomatic literature. It was Dunning who called his study as "the study of the art of government rather than a theory of

the State". Thus, the substance of his thought covers a much narrower field than Aristotle. But, in this narrow field his treatment of the problems exhibit, in the words of Sabine, "the shrewdest insight into points of weakness and strength in a political situation, the clearest and coolest judgement of the resources and temperament of an opponent, the most objective estimate of the limitations of a policy, the soundest common sense in forecasting the logic of events, and the outcome of a course of action".

These qualities of Machiavelli made him a favourite with the diplomats from his own day to the present, but these qualities are also associated with a possibility that the importance of the end would override the means. That is why, his conceptions are expressed in terms like—might is right; end justifies the means; necessity knows no law, etc., but his thoughts carry more import by what is understood by these terms.

5.4 MACHIAVELLI'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Out of his two most important works, the "Prince" is an analysis of the political system of a strong monarchy while the "Discourses on Livius" of a strong republic. In the first one, the main theme is the successful creation of a principality by an individual, in the other it is the creation of an empire of free citizens. But in both, the centre of his thought is the method of those who wield the power of the state rather than the fundamental relationship in which the essence of the state exists. He viewed things from the standpoint of the ruler and not the ruled, Preservation of the state rather than the excellence of its constitution were his main consideration. He writes of the mechanisms of the governments by which the state can be made strong and the politics that can expand their powers. He points out the errors that bring about their downfall too. In the words of Sabine: "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. He often discusses the advantage of immorality skillfully used to gain a ruler's ends, and it is this which is mainly responsible for his evil repute. But for the most part he is not so much immoral as non-moral." A thing which would be immoral for an individual to do, might, if necessary, in interest of the state, be justifiably done by a ruler or a monarch. His indifference towards morality, therefore, can be explained in terms of political expediency.

Machiavelli based his thought on two premises. First, on the ancient Greek assumption that the state is the highest form of human association necessary for the protection, welfare and perfection of humanity and as such the interests of the state are definitely superior to individual or social interests. The second premise was that the self-interest in one form or another, particularly material self-interest, is the most potent of all factors of political motivation. Hence, the art of statecraft consists of the cold calculations of elements of self-interests in any given situation and the intelligent use of the practical means to meet the conflicting interests. Both these premises are reflected in his two books.

5.5 CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL EGOISM

Another cardinal principle besides the principle of 'moral indifference', which forms Machiavelli's political philosophy, is the principle of "Universal Egoism". He did not believe in the essential goodness of human nature, he held that all men are wicked and essentially selfish. Selfishness and egoism are the chief motive forces of human conduct. Fear is the one motivating and dominating element in life, which is mightier than love, and the effective motive in him is desire for security because human nature moreover is, aggressive and acquisitive. Men aim to keep what they already have and desire to acquire more and there are no limits to human

desires, and all being the same there being a natural scarcity of things there is everlasting competition and strife. Security is only possible when the ruler is strong. A 'Prince', therefore, ought to personify fear. A Prince who is feared knows how to stand in relation to his subjects and aims at the security of their life and property. Men always commit error of not knowing when to limit their hopes, therefore, the only way to remedy this evil is to hold the opposing interests in maintaining an equilibrium between them in order to remain and maintain a healthy and stable society. These basic elements of human nature which are responsible to make him ungrateful, fickle, deceitful and cowardly along with their evil effects were most prominent in Italy during Machiavelli's time. The corruption in all spheres was the order of the day and all sorts of licence and violence, absence of discipline, great inequalities in wealth and power, the destruction of peace and justice and the growth of disorderly ambitions and dishonesty prevailed. The only way to rectify such a situation was the establishment of absolute monarchy and despotic powers, according to Machiavelli.

5.6 THE "PRINCE"

The 'Prince' of Machiavelli is the product of the prevailing conditions of his time in his country Italy. As such it is not an academic treatise or value oriented political philosophy; it is in real sense real *politik*. It is a memorandum on the art of government, is pragmatic in character and provides technique of the fundamental principles of statecraft for a successful ruler-ship. It deals with the machinery of the government which the successful ruler could make use of. The whole argument of the Prince is based on the two premises borrowed mainly from Aristotle. One of these is that the State is the highest form of human association and the most indispensable instrument for the promotion of human welfare, and that by merging himself in the state the individual finds his fullest development, that is, his best self.

Consideration of the welfare of the state, therefore, outweighs any consideration of individual or group welfare. The second premise is that material self is the most potent motive force in individual and public action. Machiavelli almost identifies the state with the ruler. These premises led him to the conclusion that the Prince is the perfect embodiment of shrewdness and self-control who makes capital alike of his virtues and vices. This quality of the Prince makes him worthy of successful seizure of power. According to Machiavelli: "Those things were virtuous in a Prince which excelled in bringing success and power and that virtue lay in functional excellence; these were ruthlessness, cunningness, deceitfulness, boldness and shrewdness along with unflinching will." Undoubtedly, this is an idealised picture of an Italian tyrant of the 16th Century who has influenced Machiavelli's imagination.

Chapter XVIII of the 'Prince' gives Machiavelli's idea of the virtues which a successful ruler must possess. Integrity may be theoretically better than collusion, but cunningness and subtlety are often useful. The two basic means of success for a prince are—the judicious use of law and physical force. He must combine in himself rational as well as brutal characteristics, a combination of 'lion' and 'fox'. The prince must play the fox and act hypocrite to disguise his real motives and inclinations. He must be free from emotional disturbances and ready and capable of taking advantage of the emotions of others. He should be a cool and calculating opportunist and should oppose evil by evil. In the interest of the state he should be prepared to sin boldly. Severity rather than mildness must characterise his attitude in public affairs and the prince should aim to be feared than loved. But, above all, he must keep his hands off the property and women of his subjects because economic motives being the mainspring of human conduct a prince must do all he can to keep his subjects materially contented. A prince might execute a conspirator but should not confiscate his property. To Machiavelli preservation of

state was *raison d'être* of monarchy; therefore, a prince must regard his neighbours as likely enemies and keep always on guard. A clever prince will attack the enemy before the latter is ready. He must be of unshakable purpose and dead to every sentiment except love for his state, which must be saved even at the cost of his own soul. He must not allow himself to be weighed down by any consideration of justice or injustice, good or bad, right or wrong, mercy or cruelty, honour or dishonour in matters of the state.

According to Machiavelli state actions were not to be judged by individual ethics. He prescribes double standard of conduct for statesmen and the private citizens. This exaggerated notion of what a ruler and a state can do is perhaps because of Machiavelli's understanding of the problem that confronted a ruler amid the corruption of 16th Century Italy. Thus, according to him a sheer political genius a successful ruler had to create a military power to overcome the disorderly cities and principalities and, therefore, the force behind the law must be the only power that holds society together; moral obligations must in the end be derived from law and government.

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The ruler is the creator of law as also of morality, for moral obligations must ultimately be sustained by law and the ruler, as the creator of the state, is not only outside the law, but if the law enacts morals, he is outside morality as well. There is no standard to judge his acts except the success of his political expedience for enlarging and perpetuating the power of his state. It will be the ruin of the state if the ruler's public actions were to be weighed down by individual ethics, especially those which relate to internal and external security. Therefore, public and private standards were difficult. It was always wrong for an individual to commit crime, even to lie, but sometimes good and necessary for the ruler to do so in the interest of the state. Similarly, it is wrong for a private individual to kill, but not for the state to execute someone by way of punishment. The state hangs a murderer because public safety demands it. Public conduct, in fact, is neither inherently good nor bad. It is good if its results are good. A citizen acts for himself and as such is also responsible for his action, whereas the state acts for all, and therefore, same principles of conduct could not be applied to both. The state has no ethics. It is a non-ethical entity.

The state being the highest form of human association, has supreme claim over men's obligations. This theory of Machiavelli gives supreme importance to the law given in society. The ruler, in order to prove this claim, must at the same time embrace every opportunity to develop his reputation. He must keep people busy with great enterprises, must surround all his actions with an air of grandeur, and must openly participate in the affairs of neighbouring states. Besides, he must also pose as the patron of art, commerce and agriculture and should refrain from imposing burdensome taxation. To Machiavelli, the justice of state was in the interest of the sovereign and the safety of state was the supreme law.

One of the most important characteristics of Machiavelli's philosophy in the case of Prince was that he should aim at acquisition and extension of his princely powers and territories. If he fails to do this, he is bound to perish. For this he should always regard his neighbouring states as enemies and remain always prepared to attack them at some weak moments of theirs. For this he must have a well trained citizen's soldiery. A good army of soldiers are in reality the essence of princely strength. Mercenary soldiers should be rid of, as they may become the cause of lawlessness. Such bands of hired ruffians would be ready to fight for the largest pay and could not be faithful to anyone. This could shake the authority of the Prince; therefore, the Prince must possess a nationalised standing army of soldiers at his disposal.

5.7 MACHIAVELLI'S CLASSIFICATION OF FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

Machiavelli's classification of the forms of government is rather unsystematic. The treatment of government in his two major works is significantly different; rather inconsistent and contradictory to each other. The 'Prince' deals with monarchies or absolute governments, while the 'Discourses' showed his admiration for expanded Roman Republic. There was nothing in Machiavelli's account of the absolute monarchy corresponding to his obviously sincere enthusiasm for the liberty and self-government of Roman Republic. In both forms his emphasis is on the cardinal principle of the preservation of the state as distinct from its foundings, depends upon the excellence of its law, for this is the source of all civic virtues of its citizens. Even in a monarchy the prime condition of stable government is that it should be regulated by law. Thus, Machiavelli insisted upon the need for legal remedies against official abuses in order to prevent illegal violence. We pointed out the political danger of lawlessness in rulers and folly of vexations and harassing policies.

Both the books show equally the qualities for which Machiavelli has been specially known, such as, indifference to the use of immoral means for political purpose and belief that governments depend largely on force and craft. Machiavelli never erected his belief in the omnipotent law giver into a general theory of absolutism. However, what does not appear in the 'Prince' is his genuine enthusiasm for popular government of the sort exemplified in the Roman Republic, but which he believed to be impractical in Italy when he wrote. Both the books present aspects of the same subject—the cause of the rise and decline of states and the means by which statesmen could make them permanent. This corresponds to twofold classification of states or form of government. The stability and preservation of the state is the prime objective of the ruler. Machiavelli favoured a gentle rule where ever possible and the use of severity only in moderation. He believed explicitly that government is more stable where it is shared by many. He preferred election to heredity as a mode of choosing rulers. He also spoke for general freedom to propose measures for the public good and for liberty of discussion before reaching a decision. He, in his 'Discourses' expressed that people must be independent and strong, because there is no way to make them suitable without giving them the means of rebellion. He had a high opinion both of the virtue and the judgement of an uncorrupted people as compared to those of the prince. These observations only show the conflicting and contradictory ideas of Machiavelli's philosophy; on one hand he advocates an absolute monarchy and on the other shows his admiration for a republic. As Sabine remarks: "His judgement was swayed by two admirations—for the resourceful despot and for the free, self-governing people—which were not consistent. He patched the two together, rather precariously, as the theories respectively of founding a state and of preserving it after it is founded. In more modern terms it might be said that he had *one theory for revolution and another for government*." Obviously, he recommended despotism mainly for reforming a corrupt state and preserving its security. However, he believed, that state can be made permanent only if the people are admitted to some share in the government and if the prince conducts the ordinary business of the state in accordance with law and with a due regard for the property and rights of his subjects. Despotic violence is a powerful political medicine, needed in corrupt states and for special contingencies, but it is still a poison which must be used with the greatest caution.

5.8 THE DOCTRINE OF AGGRANDISEMENT

In both 'Prince' and 'Discourses' Machiavelli insists on the necessity of extending the territory of the state. According to him *either a state must expand or perish*. His idea of the extension

of the dominion of state did not mean the blending of two or more social or political organisations, but the subjection of a number of states under the rule of a single prince or commonwealth. Extension of dominion was easier in one's own country, where there was no difficulty of language or of an institution to overcome in the assimilation of conquered people. Roman state and its policy of expansion perhaps set an ideal before Machiavelli. Force of arms was necessary for both—for political aggrandisement as well as for the preservation of the state, but force must be applied judiciously combined with craft. In a monarchy a prince must pay due respect to the established customs and institutions of the land which the people hold something as dearer than liberty or life itself. But, to establish any kind of order a monarchical government is preferable, especially when the people are thoroughly corrupt and the laws become powerless for restraint. It becomes necessary to establish some superior power which, with a royal hand and with full and absolute powers could put a curb upon the excessive ambitions and corruption of powerful people.

Despite the cynicism and bias of Machiavelli's judgement in favour of the prince there is no mistaking the fact of his esteem for liberal and lawful government. He was inclined favourably for popular government where possible and monarchy where necessary. In both forms a well-trained army of soldiers was needed because a government ultimately was based on force. The ruler must fire the imagination of the subjects by grand schemes and enterprises and should patronise art and literature. An ideal prince thus, is an enlightened despot of a non-moral type while in republic the ruler or the ruling class have to observe the supremacy of law, because the preservation of the state depends upon the excellence of law which is the source of all civic virtues of the citizens and which determines the national character of its people. Machiavelli holds both monarchy and republican form of government as ideal, but he had very low opinion of aristocracy and nobility, whom he perceived as antagonistic to both the monarchy and the middle class, and that an orderly government required their suppression or expatriation. Side by side with Machiavelli's dislike of the nobility stands his hatred of mercenary soldiers as they may prove the main cause of lawlessness and disorder and ultimate destruction of the stability of the state. As the art of war is the primary concern of a ruler and the condition of his success in all his ventures he must aim in possessing a strong, well equipped and well disciplined force of his own citizens, attached to his interests by ties of loyalty to the state. Behind Machiavelli's belief and his cynicism of his political opinion, was national patriotism and a desire for the unification of Italy and her preservation for internal disorder and foreign invaders. He frankly asserted that duty towards one's own country overrides all other duties and scruples.

5.9 EVALUATION

Machiavelli's political theories were not developed in a systematic manner, they were mainly in the form of remarks upon particular situations. In the words of Sabine: "The character of Machiavelli and the true meaning of his philosophy have been one of the enigmas of modern history. He has been represented as an utter cynic, and impassioned patriot, an ardent nationalist, a political Jesuit, a convinced democrat, and unscrupulous seeker after the favour of despots. In each of these views, incompatible as they are, there is probably an element of truth. What is emphatically not true is that any one of them gives a complete picture either of Machiavelli or his thought." This is because behind his philosophy, or implicit in his concepts, there often is a consistent point of view which might be developed into a political theory, and was in fact so developed after his time. Many political thinkers drew their inspiration and further developed solid and most important political concepts such as the concept of the 'state' and its true meaning from Machiavelli. In the words of Sabine: "Machiavelli more than any other political thinker created the meaning that has been attached to the state in modern political usage,.. The

state as an organised force, supreme in its own territory and pursuing a conscious policy of aggrandisement in its relations with other states, became not only the typical modern political institution but increasingly the most powerful institution in modern society."

Machiavelli is known as a father of modern political theory. Apart from theorising about the state he has also given meaning to the concept of sovereignty. But he never let his belief in the general theory of an omnipotent law giver turn into a general theory of absolutism or absolute monarchy, which the subsequent writer Thomas Hobbes did. This concept of sovereignty—internal as well as external—is implicit in his recommendation of despotic power of the ruler for making the state permanent and safe internally and externally. This idea of his was later developed into systematic theory of state sovereignty by French thinker Jean Bodin, while Hugo Grotius built upon a theory of legal sovereignty, which was further given a proper formulation by the English theorist John Austin. Earlier, Hobbes while justifying his social contract had also borrowed Machiavelli's conception of human nature on which he built his social contract theory and that of absolute sovereignty.

Machiavelli was the first who gave the idea of secularism. In the words of Allen: "The Machiavelli state is, to begin with, in a complete sense, an entirely secular state." Although he attributes to religion an important place in the state, he at the same time separates the two. He placed religion *within* the state *not* above it and according to him, "the observance of the ordinances of religion is the cause of greatness of the commonwealth; as also in their neglect the cause of their ruin."

Machiavelli's belief in the potency of material interests of people rather than the spiritual ones influenced Hegel and subsequently Marx in propounding their theory of Material Origin of the State. Machiavelli was also the first exponent of the theory of aggrandisement which is the basis of modern power politics. In day-to-day international politics each state aims at increasing its economic and military power over other states.

Machiavelli was the first pragmatist in the history of political thought. His method and approach to problems of politics were guided by common sense and history. According to Professor Maxey: "His passion for the practical as against the theoretical undoubtedly did much to rescue political thought from the scholastic obscurantism of the Middle Ages." Machiavelli's idea of omnipotence of the state and the business of the government was to provide security to person and property and has had a long lasting effect. His ideas were revolutionary in nature and substance and he brought politics in line with political practice. In the end, it can be said that a good deal of odium is attached to Machiavelli for his cynical disregard for morality and religion. Machiavellism has become a by-word for unscrupulousness; but it must be noted that he wrote the 'Prince' and 'Discourses' primarily from the point of view of the preservation of state, every other consideration being secondary. Machiavelli undoubtedly was frank, bold and honest besides being practical in understanding the real politics which made him a favourite of diplomats during his own time to the present. "Once we restore Machiavelli to the world in which his ideas were initially formed, we can begin to appreciate the extraordinary originality of his attack on the prevailing moral assumptions of his age. And once we grasp the implications of his own moral outlook, we can readily see why his name is still so invoked whenever the issues of political power and leadership are discussed" (Skinner 1981: 2).

5.10 SUMMARY

Machiavelli was a product of the age of prolific change and of a period that marked a definite reaction against the authority of the Pope and his preaching of spiritualism. He is known for

ushering in the Modern Age by ridding politics of the vassalage of religion. Machiavelli's methods were historical but he was a political realist, more concerned with the actual working of government than a theory of the state. He built his theories on the premise that men are essentially wicked and selfish. According to him, state is the highest form of human association and an indispensable instrument for the promotion of human welfare. A successful ruler or 'Prince' should be a perfect embodiment of shrewdness and self-control, making full use of his virtues and vices. Two basic means of success for a 'Prince' are judicious use of law and physical force. The ruler is creator of law and of morality.

Certain contradictions in Machiavelli's thinking have been pointed out. While he emphasised on the preservation of the state dependent on the excellence of its law and civic virtues of its citizens, his choice of the form of government is unclear. He talks both of monarchies along with showing his admiration for an expanded Roman Republic. His theories were not developed systematically and are mainly in the form of remarks. Each of his works reflects the truth but none of them give a complete picture of his thoughts.

5.11 EXERCISES

- 1) In what way does Machiavelli's works reflect his times?
- 2) Enumerate the main features of Machiavelli's thoughts on politics and forms of government.
- 3) Critically analyse Machiavelli's political theories.