

Re-look at Plato's Theory of Justice in the Context of the 21st Century”

Dr Rantu Sarmah
Assistant Professor
Barpathar College

Abstract: Plato was a great philosopher who was not satisfied with the political conditions in Athens prevailing at his time. In his philosophy, Plato gives a prominent place to the idea of justice. The Democracy had degenerated into the Tyranny of ‘The Thirty’, which had gone down to such a low ebb that it had earned a name for taking wrong decisions and mismanagement. In real practice, it was the rule of the ignorant. There was political mismanagement, and rulers were the most selfish. Selfishness had divided the Athenian society. There were painful features of democracy in those days, and now, if we look at the present context, we find that a system where the same features can be seen. This study tries to find out the importance of the theory of justice in the context of the 21st century and the nature of the justice which was advocated as the fundamental principle of a well-ordered society.

Keywords: *Theory, Justice, Democracy, Selfishness.*

Introduction: Word justice has been derived from the Greek word ‘Dikaiosume’ which has wider implications than the word justice. Plato did not desire or wish to use the word in the sense in which it is even today used. He applied a negative system in explaining his concept of justice by discussing establishing his own concept of justice. Plato’s justice was an essential part of a state, and it kept various organs and individuals in close harmony with each other. He pleaded that justice should be properly administered. His concept of justice was somewhat different from the modern one.

Background of the theory of justice: Plato was not satisfied with the prevailing situation of Athens, which was not intolerable to Plato. He saw the political mismanagement, and the rulers were the most selfish. The experts were not governing the masses. Athenian society was divided by the selfishness into the rich and the poor. He said that that was a perverted form of democracy. Plato saw the painful features of democracy. Democracy does not provide an opportunity to the masses to participate in the affairs of the state. The institution of monarchy had been monopolised by a few powerful persons. Another painful feature of the democracy of those days was the lottery system, which was applied for the appointment of office bearers for the public offices. This actually meant the right of the ignorant to govern over the people. Even a person with the lowest calibre and understanding could be appointed to the highest executive job by virtue of the lottery system. There was a problem where the Sophistic teaching had preached individualism. It meant that the individual was in a better position to understand his own interest than the state. Where individuals get the inspiration to capture power. This tendency was developed at that time, and it also divided Athenians into hostile camps. Under those conditions, Plato developed his theory of justice. He thought that his theory of justice was the remedy for cutting all the evils of democracy. This study tries to find out the importance of the theory of justice in the context of

Objectives:

1. To analyse the nature of the justice which was advocated as the fundamental principle of a well-ordered society.
2. **Importance of the theory of justice in the context of the 21st century.**

Methodology: This study is based on secondary data sources, mainly books, Journals, and e-content, etc.

Theories of justice: Before Plato, there were many theories of justice which were prevailing at his own time. Plato discussed every possible theory prevailing in his own time. Plato criticised all the theories and expressed the weaknesses of each theory, and finally, he advocated a theory and gave his own definition of justice. Various theories are as follows:

1. **Theory of Cephalus (Traditionalism):** The exponent of his theory is Cephalus, who believed in the concept of traditional morality. According to him, justice was in speaking the truth and paying what was due to God and men. Cephalus's son Polemarchus, who continues the discussion in 'Republic' still further argues that justice should be administered in such a way that good is done to the friends and harm to the enemies. He also believes that justice is an art and that few alone can practice that.
2. **Theory of Thrasymachus (Radicalism):** This theory demanded that justice is not bound by moral obligations. It is the interest of the strong. According to this theory, in all forms of government, laws are made to suit the convenience of the rulers alone.
3. **Glaucon Theory (Pragmatism):** Glaucon was the chief exponent of this theory. According to this theory, justice is not something natural or permanent, but on the other hand, it is something based on conventions and customs and thus artificial. The theory believes that in the state of nature, the people did not know anything about justice, but with the passing of time, its absence became intolerable. The weaker section of the community, who were the worst sufferers, combined together and decided neither to do any injustice nor to suffer from that. Glaucon believed that justice was the child of fear, and there had been no fear of oppression at the hands of the strong.

Plato did not agree with all three of the above-mentioned theories of his time, and the grounds are as follows:

1. Plato disagreed with Cephalus' Traditional theory because he pleaded that justice was not an art and also that the distinction between friends and foes was impracticable. A friend of today could be the foe of tomorrow, and vice versa or of being unjust. This concept of justice was individualistic and not social in nature. According to Plato, it was essential that justice must have social bias and should be most acceptable to society as a whole.
2. Plato discarded Thrasymachus' or Radical theory on the grounds that justice can never be exclusively in the interest of the strong. Similarly, he did not agree with the idea that it was better to be unjust rather than just.

3. Plato said that Glaucon or Pragmatic theory was defective because justice was neither conventional nor artificial nor the result of any social contact, but that it was something internal, inherent and lasting.

Plato's concept of justice: Plato's theory of justice was the fundamental principle of a well-ordered society. He put more stress on the concept of justice. He believed that proper justice could be achieved only through his process of justice. While dealing with the subject of justice, he adopted the system of 'Long Letters' which, in other words, meant solving deeper mysteries only gradually. Plato believed that justice resided both in the individual and in society. A perfect community should have four virtues, namely wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. According to him, justice is the only virtue which permanently resides in the state.

He believed that human beings have three essential ingredients, namely, reason, spirit and appetite. He said that those who have reason are the rulers and those who have spirit are soldiers, and last, those who have appetite are farmers. He argued that appetite was the lowest and reason was the highest virtue.

He believed that the state came into being to satisfy the wants and needs of the people, which resulted in exchange and division of labour and if the system was to work satisfactorily, for that it was essential that there must be overproduction everywhere. This excessive production was in the mutual interest of all. He also said that in a healthy society, each one should get work of their choice.

Plato's justice has nothing to do with the rights of the people or their maintenance through the courts of law. But on the other hand, it is something which is a social virtue and administers group relationships. The main principles of his justice are as follows:

1. One shouldn't interfere in the affairs of others.
2. A functional specialisation should be established in society.
3. Justice should harmonise wisdom, courage and temperance. By this, Plato meant that every citizen in the state should perform according to his ability and capability as duties assigned to him.
4. According to him, justice should not be individualistic but collective. His justice is not in terms of individual rights but in terms of individual duties. If every citizen of a state performs duties properly, then the sole right could automatically follow.
5. The Platonic concept of justice means rendering service to the community as a whole.
6. His concept did not rest with performing legal duties alone, but also in performing universal as well as ethical duties.
7. Justice is not any specialisation but only a condition of specialisation. It is a prerequisite of expertness.
8. His concept of justice is not legal but universal.
9. Justice is neither conventional nor external.

Criticism of his theory of justice:

1. Justice should be uniform and universal; it should not be class-ridden.
2. The Platonic concept of justice believes that it is only the proper performance of duties by each individual. It is something moral and not legal. But in actual practice, at no stage of human history has law remained merely a moral and not a legal force.
3. Plato's concept of justice is not humanitarian but only totalitarian because it establishes certain privileges for a class of people.
4. His belief in absolute and universal justice ignores social, cultural and historical differences. Justice is dynamic and must evolve with changing societal conditions.
5. Plato's proposal of common property and abolition of family for the guardian class has been criticised as unnatural and not practical.

Importance of the Theory of Justice in the Context of the 21st Century: Plato has been criticised on many grounds. In spite of all that, it cannot be denied that Plato touched the very basis of the social evil in the state, namely, maladjustment in functioning. If the Platonic concept of justice is properly understood, it shall mean devotion to duty and functional specialisation. If this sense of devotion to duty is there in the state at the present day, then many social evils would not be there in this world.

In the 21st century, the theory of justice has gained renewed importance due to the rapid social, economic, technological, and political changes occurring worldwide. Justice provides a moral and philosophical framework to address issues of inequality, human rights, freedom, and fairness in increasingly complex societies. With globalisation, digital transformation, and growing diversity, traditional notions of justice are being challenged, making theoretical guidance essential for shaping just institutions and policies.

The theory of justice is crucial in addressing widening economic inequalities, unemployment, and unequal access to education, healthcare, and opportunities. Thinkers such as John Rawls emphasise fairness, equal basic liberties, and justice for the least advantaged, principles that remain highly relevant in tackling poverty, gender discrimination, caste and racial inequalities, and social exclusion in modern societies. In the 21st century, justice also extends beyond national boundaries, emphasising global justice in areas such as climate change, migration, and international trade.

Technological advancements like artificial intelligence, data surveillance, and digital governance raise new ethical and legal concerns related to privacy, accountability, and equal access. The theory of justice helps evaluate these developments to ensure technology serves humanity without violating fundamental rights. Similarly, environmental justice has become central as climate crises disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, making fairness and responsibility key concerns of contemporary justice debates.

Overall, the theory of justice remains vital in the 21st century as it guides democratic governance, protects human dignity, promotes social harmony, and ensures sustainable and inclusive development. By providing

normative principles to judge laws, policies, and institutions, it continues to be an essential tool for creating a fair, equitable, and humane global society.

Acknowledgement: I thank all the individuals for their expertise and assistance throughout all aspects that I referred to in the study, and for helping me to write the article.

References:

1. H. R. Mukhi, Political Thought, Revised and published by S.B. D. Publishers Distributors, 1999.
2. Sachdeva And Gupta, A Simple Study of Political Thought, Published by Ajanta Prakashan Delhi, 1998
3. Plato. The Republic. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve. Hackett Publishing, 1992.
4. Aristotle. Politics. Translated by Ernest Barker. Oxford University Press, 1946.
5. Sabine, G. H., & Thorson, T. L. A History of Political Theory. Oxford & IBH Publishing, 1973.
6. Ebenstein, W., Ebenstein, A. O., & Fogelman, E. Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2000.
7. Cress, D. A. Plato: The Republic. Hackett Publishing, 2000.
8. Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. Harvard University Press, 1971.
9. Mukherjee, Subrata, and Sushila Ramaswamy. A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx. Prentice Hall of India, 2007.

