POLYBIUS (204-122 BC)

Polybius is considered as the first Roman Political thinker. Rome defeated Macedon in 169 BC. About 1000 Greek people were taken as prisoners to Rome. Polybius was one of them. Most of them killed later. But Polybius was one of the 300 people who survived. He was taken to the house of a Roman to teach his children. He was a very scholarly person. Therefore, he studied the functioning of Roman government. Soon, he became a friend of Romans. Romans saw his knowledge and abilities. They appointed Polybius as the administrator of Greek City-States. He visited various countries of Europe, Africa and Asia. He studied how governments function. He studied how Rome became a big Empire. Rome was only a small City-State. In just 53 years, Rome became an Empire. So, Polybius wrote about the success of Rome. 'Histories' was the famous book of Polybius. There are 40 volumes for this book. It is an important historical book for students of Political Science. Polybius said that the success of Rome is due to one reason: The Roman Constitution and government. The great constitution and the great government made Rome Great. The success of Rome was not due to military superiority. Military power and great leaders are only secondary.

Polybius and Classification of Government

The political philosophy of Polybius is found in his 'Histories'. His classification of governments is very similar to that of Aristotle. He basically accepted Aristotle's classification of Governments. Aristotle classified governments into six forms. Polybius also tried to classify governments into six forms. Three were normal forms and three were perverted forms. Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy were the normal forms of government. The perverted forms were Tyranny, Oligarchy and extreme Democracy. According to him, each form of government has its own seeds of destruction. No government is stable.

Reasons for Political Change

According to Polybius, a particular form of government cannot be called the best form. There is always a possibility of change from one form of government to the other. According to Polybius, the original and the natural form of government is Kingship. The oldest form of government was Monarchy. Monarchy is based on force. However, in the course of time, it got public approval. According to Polybius, Governments moved in a circle. When Monarchy disregarded morality and ethical values, it became tyranny. He said that Oligarchy also is not good. It is the rule of the few for themselves. Democracy also is not good because it is a kind of mob rule.

According to Polybius, there are many reasons for a revolution against the government. The aspirants of the throne might lead intrigues against the King. There may be fights among the members of royal family for power. Polybius said that luxurious living, deprivation of power and prestige, unreasonable behaviour etc can cause resentment among the members of royal family to feud against the King. Even love for wine and gain can cause issues. When power is concentrated on few hands, it can also lead to revolution. According to Polybius, there shall be access to power for all alike. Right for power should not be concentrated in too few hands.

Best form of Government

Polybius was of the opinion that a grand combination of various systems of government is the best. It will promote stability. The best feature from each system should be borrowed.

This will make a system which is relatively perfect. Therefore, mixed form of government is the best form. He said that government should be a mixture of Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy. The best constitution is the one which contained the best elements of all the three normal forms of government. Roman government had all these three elements.

A good constitution should contain all the three elements which the Romans combined in their constitution. The Consuls had the military power. They represented the Monarchy. They are vested with absolute authority. But they required the support of the people. They needed the support of the Senate also.

The Senate had judicial and financial powers. They represented the Aristocratic elements. They controlled the supply of food, clothing and other such necessities of life. They controlled money also. So the Consuls need to depend upon the Senate for making military operations.

Popular Assembly had powers of discussion and debate. They represented the Democratic elements. Each organ of Roman society was closely connected with other elements. It was a very healthy arrangement. These three powers checked each other. The Consuls had absolute powers checked by the Senate. The Senate enjoyed administrative, financial and other powers. But they were checked by the popular assembly. The Popular Assembly had no powers without the help of Consuls and the Senate. Thus it was a system of Checks and Balances.

According to Polybius, at earlier occasions, dictators lost many wars because there was no one to check them. Constitutional governments won wars because, there were a system of checks and balances. He believed that it is not the form of government which protected the freedom of the people. It is the character, morality, quality and character which determined the freedom of the people.

Appreciation of Polybius:

Polybius was not an original thinker. He was a very practical observer. His philosophy and understandings were based on the established concepts of state craft. His most original contribution was that of the mixed constitution. It was borrowed from Plato. He was the first systematic thinker to propose idea of the mixed form of government. His concept of circle of government was borrowed from Aristotle. He said that the balance of power existed in the governments and not in the people. His conception of the balance of power is a basic feature of modern constitutions. He was the first political thinker who proposed the idea of checks and balances. It was later adopted by the makers of the American Constitution. He also centred his idea on the objective of stability of governments. It is good to see that Polybius had given importance to the objective of stability of government.