Chapter 1: Political Theory: An Introduction

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Which of the following statements are true/false about Political Theory? (a) It discusses ideas that form the basis of political institutions. (b) It explains the relationship between different religions. (c) It explains the meanings of concepts like equality and freedom. (d) It predicts the performance of political parties.

(a) True. Political theory deals with the ideas and principles, such as rule of law, separation of powers and judicial review, that shape constitutions, governments and social life.
(b) False. Studying how different religions relate to one another is not the task of political theory. It may discuss secularism as a concept, but it does not explain inter-religious relations.
(c) True. Clarifying the meaning and significance of concepts like freedom, equality and justice is one of its central tasks. It does this by examining the arguments of thinkers and everyday usage.
(d) False. Political theory does not forecast how parties will perform. It trains citizens to think rationally about political questions and to assess political events, and it points out trends and possibilities for the future.

Q2 Politics is more than what politicians do. Do you agree with this statement? Give examples.

Yes, I agree. Many people link politics only with politicians, who may defect from parties, make false promises or be tied to scams. But the chapter argues that politics is an integral part of every society. No society can exist without some form of political organisation and collective decision making.

Politics arises because people have different visions of what is just and desirable. It covers what governments do, and also how people struggle to influence decisions. People are politically active whenever they negotiate with each other and take part in collective activities to promote social development and resolve common problems.

Examples: citizens form associations, organise campaigns and demonstrations to change laws, debate corruption or reservations, and take part in gram sabhas. Institutions such as the family, tribes and economic bodies also help people live together and fulfil their needs. Gandhi said politics envelops us like the coils of a snake, so we must wrestle with it.

Q3 Vigilant citizens are a must for the successful working of a democracy. Comment.

A democracy works well only when citizens are informed, thoughtful and watchful. The chapter compares citizens to the audience at a music concert. They are not the main performers, but they set the agenda, appreciate the output and put in new requests. Musicians perform better when the audience is knowledgeable and appreciative. In the same way, an educated and vigilant citizenry makes those who play politics more public-spirited.

Government actions affect our lives deeply, so vigilant citizens protest against bad policies, debate the actions of representatives and press for change. They take part in gram sabhas and give views on websites and polls. These contributions count only if they are reasoned and informed, not arbitrary preferences. Without such vigilance, those in power would face no check and public interest could suffer.

Q4 In what ways is the study of political theory useful for us? Identify four ways in which political theory can be useful to us?

The chapter gives four main reasons.
1. Relevant to all and to our future. It is useful for politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, lawyers, judges, activists and journalists, and we may join one of these professions. Like basic arithmetic, it is useful to life in general.
2. Responsible citizenship. We will soon be citizens who vote and decide issues. Knowing the political ideas and institutions that shape our world helps us act responsibly, take part in gram sabhas and give informed views on websites and polls.
3. Examining our prejudices. Discrimination on caste, religion, gender or class exists in daily life. Political theory makes us examine our ideas and feelings, which makes us more moderate.
4. Debating skills. Arguing with others makes us seek reasons. Political theory exposes us to systematic thinking on justice and equality, so we can polish our opinions and argue in an informed way.

Q5 Do you think that a good/convincing argument can compel others to listen to you?

Yes, to a large extent. A convincing argument is supported by reasons rather than arbitrary preferences, and people find it hard to ignore reasoned points. The chapter notes that if we simply express arbitrary preferences we are not very effective, but thoughtful and mature views can express common interests well.

The dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus shows this. Socrates uses reason to reveal the limitations and inconsistencies in a point of view, and his adversaries finally admit that the views they had lived by could not be sustained. Political theory teaches us to defend opinions with reasons and to argue for the sake of common interests. These skills of debating rationally and communicating effectively are great assets.

However, a good argument can only earn a hearing and invite response. It cannot force anyone to agree, since listeners may still hold different opinions and interests.

Q6 Do you think studying political theory is like studying mathematics? Give reasons for your answer.

In one respect it is similar, but in another it differs sharply.

Similarity: the chapter compares the two. We learn mathematics although not all of us will become mathematicians or engineers, because basic arithmetic is useful to life in general. Likewise, political theory is useful even if we do not become politicians. It helps us as citizens, voters and debaters.

Difference: mathematics usually has one definition of a triangle or a square, but political theory finds many definitions of freedom, equality or justice. These concepts concern our relationships with other human beings, not things, and human beings hold varied opinions that need to be understood and harmonised. The meaning of equality also depends on context, such as equal opportunity in a queue versus special provisions for the disabled or the poor.

So it is like mathematics in usefulness, but unlike it in having no single fixed answer.