

MEANING OF THE STATE

It is significant that though some sort of political organization has existed since ancient times, such as Greek city-states and the Roman empire, yet the concept of the 'state' as such is comparatively modern. The contemporary concept of the state owes its origin to Machiavelli (1469-1527) who expressed this idea in early sixteenth century as 'the power which has authority over men' (The Prince; 1513). This was an important idea because it describes the nature of the state, not the end of the state which was a question of political philosophy rather than political sociology or political science. This peculiar feature of the state has been the focus of attention of many recent thinkers.

Max Weber (1864-1920), a famous German sociologist, sought to evolve a 'sociological' definition of the state (1920):

Sociologically, the state cannot be defined in terms of its ends... Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific means peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely the use of physical force. (From Max Weber, tr. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills)

From this standpoint, Weber arrives at the following definition which is widely acknowledged in modern political theory: 'A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'.

R.M. MacIver, in his famous work The Modern State (1926), sought to distinguish the state from other kinds of associations in that it embraces the whole

of people in a specific territory and it has the special function of maintaining social

order. It performs this function through its agent, the government 'which speaks

with the voice of law'. Similarly, R.M. MacIver and C.H. Page (Society: An Introductory Analysis; 1950) have observed: "The state is distinguished from all

other associations by its exclusive investment with the final power of coercion."

Harold J. Laski, in An Introduction to Politics (1931), similarly points out:

Whereas all other associations are voluntary in character, and can bind the individual only as he chooses membership of them, once he is a resident of some given state, legally he has no choice but to obey its commands. The state, so to say, is the crowning-point of the modern social edifice, and it is in its supremacy over all other forms of social grouping that its special nature is to be found.