

Q: Give a critical analysis of Aristotle's classification of Governments.

Ans: **Introduction:**

Aristotle regards the state as the highest kind of community that aims at the highest good. Therefore, he classified the state on the basis of the purpose of the state and the number of the rulers. Based on purpose, he further classified the state into two categories, i.e. Pure state and Perverted state. First, a pure state works for the good of the citizens; on the other hand, the perverted state exploits citizens at large. Similarly, based on the number of rulers, the state is also classified into three more categories; monarchy, a rule by one, aristocracy, a rule by few, and Polity, a rule by many. However, in Aristotle's

views the best form of state is a monarchy as he regards Polity as the worst form of the state. Besides, Aristotle also gives the cycle of a state, in which a state originates from monarchy followed by tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, Polity and ultimately ends up being a democracy. This cycle gets completed here and then starts all over again.

### ⇒ Aristotle's classification of states:

Aristotle's classification of states is based on two principles:

- 1) The number of persons who exercise supreme powers;
- 2) The ends they seek to serve self-interest or benefit of the community.

Aristotle was of the view that

when the rulers aimed at the good of the community, the states would be a pure form of state. When the rulers in such a state became selfish, the state would be called a perverted state.

### ⇒ Aristotelian cycles

No of Rulers	Good form	Bad form
one	monarchy	Tyranny
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
many	Polity	Democracy ↓ means Greek democracy.

According to Aristotle, if sovereignty resides in one person, it is monarchy. Its perverted form is

Tyranny. If sovereignty resides in a small minority of the Population, it is Aristocracy. If this small minority uses the sovereignty for its own selfish ends, it is oligarchy. If the sovereignty resides in a large proportion of the Population, it is Polity. Its Perverted form is Democracy.

### ⇒ Aristotle's cycle of Political change :

Aristotle has not only given the classification of states or governments, he has also tried to investigate their development and cycle of change. According to him, change has taken place in all the forms of administration as a natural process, because the forms of state revolve like the wheels of a cycle.

According to him, "The first.

governments were kingships; probably for this reason, in older times, when cities were small, men of eminent virtues were few. They were made kings because they were made ~~to~~ benefactors and hence benefits could only be bestowed by virtuous men. But when many persons equal in merit arose, against the pre-eminence of one, they formed a commonwealth and set up a constitution. The ruling class soon deteriorated and enriched themselves out of the public treasury. Riches became the path to honour and hence oligarchies grew up.

They passed into tyrannies, and tyrannies into democracies. The love of gain in the ruling classes always tended to diminish their number and so it strengthened the masses. The masses, in the end, set upon their masters and established

democracies".

It is clear from this statement of Aristotle that first of all monarchy was established in the society and the superior person in the society was elected as king. After some time when the kings began to exploit the masses for their selfish ends, tyranny was established.

People did not tolerate this type of administration for long and they gave the sovereign power to a few intellectuals. Thus, Aristocracy was established. With the lapse of time, the character of Aristocracy deteriorated and oligarchy was established. But the people could not, for long, tolerate a government, the aim of which was the benefit of the ruling class-alone. When opportunity came, citizens as a whole made a successful revolt against such authority and established a Polity,

the supreme power being vested in the hands of a large proportion of the population.

It was used by them for the common good. Then Polity became Perverted, it was substituted by democracy.

Democracy degenerates and people rise in revolt against it and thus democracy disappears. Again the people elect a warrior-statesman as their administrator and monarchy is established. In this way, Aristotle's cycle of political change revolves.

### ⇒ Critical Analysis:

Aristotle's classification is highly significant in political philosophy. His work turned out as a cornerstone for the forthcoming philosophers.

However, his classification doesn't cover all the forms of the modern era. As a result, it is often criticized as an unscientific

classification and that Aristotle did not differentiate between the state and the government.

The cycle of Political change given by Aristotle is fully corroborated by the history of the Greek city-states. Several examples are available in modern history which proves that anarchy in democracy is abolished by a military dictator. For example, General Ayub Khan in Pakistan, Col. Nasser in Egypt, Gurell in Turkey and Ne Win in Burma ended anarchy in democracy.

In spite of all this, the classification given by Aristotle has been criticised as under:

**1) Aristotle's classification is unscientific and quantitative:**

It is argued that his classification is not based on any scientific principle as it lays emphasis on quantitative rather



than qualitative aspect. But this criticism does not hold good Aristotle, being a disciple of Plato, could not ignore its spiritual aspect. He has emphasised the aim of the state along with his classification. Burgess has rightly said that Aristotle's classification is spiritual rather than numerical.

2) Aristotle does not distinguish between state and government: ~~Aristotle~~ criticizing Aristotle's classification, Dr. Garner has said, "Aristotle does not distinguish between state and government, with the result that his classification is the classification of states, while it ought to be of governments. This criticism of Aristotle is not justified because the distinction between the state and the government is a modern concept". According to Burgess, Aristotle's

classification is logical and the best, if his words 'state' and 'sovereignty' are substituted with 'government' and 'Rule' respectively."

3) Aristotle's classification does not cover all the modern forms of governments.

According to Seeley and Leacock, Aristotle could not conceive the modern 'country-states'. His classification is of small city-states and not of big states. If his classification is accepted, we shall have to place absolute monarchy, constitutional, elected and hereditary monarchy in one and the same category.

This will bring similarity between the monarchy as it prevails in Saudi Arabia and Great Britain, while both are not the same. Besides, modern forms of government

all Parliamentary, Presidential, unitary and Federal types. Aristotle's classification does not include and explain these forms of governments.

4) Democracy is not the worst form of government:

According to Aristotle, Democracy is the worst form of government and he has used it in the sense of a rule of crowd. This type of condition prevailed in Greece in Aristotle's time, but this is not the condition in modern times. In modern times, the term democracy is used in a good sense and it is considered to be the best form of government.

5) Aristotle's cycle of change does not fit in with the development of modern state:

The cycle of Political change given by Aristotle is applicable

only to ancient Greece and Rome and not to modern states.

For example, dictatorship of the communist Party was established after absolute monarchy in Russia.

In Germany after the First World War Emperor William II was dethroned and Democracy was established.

Democracy also failed in Germany and Dictatorship was established.

After World War II, Hitler's Dictatorship was ended and Democracy was established again in that country's one part (West Germany).

6) There is no place for mixed forms of government in Aristotle's classification :

modern governments are mixed governments. For example, Great Britain is monarchy, and the government in that country is

unitary and Parliamentary. There is Federal, Parliamentary and Democratic Government in India. The USA is a democratic and the government in that country is Presidential and Federal. These forms of government have no place in Aristotle's classification.

7) Aristotle's classification is not applicable to ideocracy or theocracy.

According to Bluntschli, Aristotle's classification is not applicable to ideocracy or theocracy, because in this type of government the supreme power is attributed to God or some other super-human being or to an idea. The men who exercise authority are deputies or vice-regents of God on earth.

8) Aristotle's classification is also

criticised for differentiating between  
Aristocracy and oligarchy, while  
modern political thinkers do  
not attach any importance to  
this difference. It is also not  
possible to say where Aristocracy  
ends and polity begins.

### ⇒ Conclusions

In a nutshell, it can be  
concluded that Aristotle's classification  
doesn't have any place for  
limited monarchy, unitary, federal,  
parliamentary or presidential form.  
The very cycle of state,  
illustrated by Aristotle, doesn't  
have any scope in the  
modern era as well. However,  
despite all these shortcomings,  
this classification of state  
by Aristotle is considered a  
landmark in political theory.

