

CHAPTER

POWER ELITES/ POLITICAL ELITES

MEANING, NATURE, THEORIES & ROLE

In every society the presence of several elites has been a recognized reality. In fact, power of a state, whether democratic or otherwise, is always in the hands of a small group of people—the leaders or leading minorities. In a representative democracy political power is always exercised by the group of top (elected) leaders and in a totalitarian system it is used by a group of leaders who wield power. The real power-holders of a state are always in minority and they exercise power on behalf of the people or their groups. Realistically speaking, the difference between a democratic system and a totalitarian system can be reduced down to the simple fact that whereas in the former the Governing/Ruling Elite is chosen by the people, in the latter it emerges out and gets imposed upon the people. Maurice Duverger has well remarked that the formula: "Government of the people, by the people and for the people" stands replaced by the formula, *government of the people, by an elite sprung from the people.*"

Mosca observes, "Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye, in all societies—from societies that are very meagerly developed and have barely attained the dawns of civilisations, down to the most advanced and powerful societies—two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolises power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism."

Ginnovani Sartori writes, "The population of every state stands divided between the governors and the Governed, ruling elite and the ruled people."

Ruling group is designated differently by different scholars and some of the popular terms are: Elites, Political Class, Ruling Elite, Governing Elite, Power Elite, Top Leadership and so forth. It is present in every political system even though its organisation, style of functioning and nature of rule is differs all political systems. All forms of representative governments are really governments by elites and every representative democracy in the intimate analysis is found to be oligarchic. A.R. Ball observes, "Howsoever much one may

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...democratic in one's political system, there is a strong element of oligarchy in every organisation. The larger the organisation, so it is argued, the greater is the tendency towards oligarchy."

Elite theorists hold that forms of representative government are merely disguises to cover minority control; the majority cannot control this ruling minority. There are problems: who constitute the political elite and whether it is defined narrowly or widely; and also there are differences on the means of recruitment, but there is unanimity on the inevitability of minority rule. In reality every society is governed by an elite, either chosen or non-chosen.

ELITE : MEANING

The dictionary meaning of the word 'Elite' is "the chosen element in the population." As such, groups of chosen elements in society are referred to as the 'elites.' Elite is a minority of population but it is a centre of power. "The Chosen element" consists of those persons who sit at the top of the society over others. In the words of G.D.H. Cole, "The chosen class may exist in a big family, club, trade union, bureaucracy, armed forces, etc., to demonstrate a group emerged to position of leadership and influence at every social level."

Elites operate in every field of life. There is intellectual elite, the elite of the city, an elite of the lawyers, etc. They are the selected successful persons in different walks of life. In the context of politics, elite is called a political elite and it consists of the persons who wield political power in the political system. Despite being a minority group, it effectively controls all effective centres of political power.

SOME POPULAR DEFINITIONS

1. Vilferdo Pareto gives two definitions of elite, a broad one that covers the whole social elite and a narrow one that refers to the governing elite :

- (i) In the broad sense "Elite is a small number of individuals who in each sphere of activity have succeeded and arrived at a higher echelon in the professional hierarchy." L
- (ii) In the narrow sense, "Ruling elite or the governing elite is that small number of individuals, who have succeeded and who exercise ruling functions, politically and socially."

2. "Elites are those minorities which are set apart from the rest of society by their pre-eminence in one or more of these various distributions." —Suzanne Kella

3. "Power Elite or Power Elites are those who occupy the command posts." —C. Wright Mill

4. "Elites are minorities of specialised leaders who enjoy disproportionate amounts of power in community affairs." —Presth

5. "A political elite comprises the power holders of a body politic. The power-holders include the leadership and the social formations from which leaders typically come, and which accountability is maintained during a given period." —Lassw

On the basis of these definitions, we can say that political elite is a minority group which exercises power in society.

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- (3) It is mostly through elections that political elites establish their popularities and the right to exercise power in society.
- (4) *Political Elites occupy big positions and control the decision-making mechanism.*
- (5) Elites exercise power and influence because they possess some superior qualities intellectual ability, administrative capacity, higher positions, military power, popular legitimacy and credibility or moral authority.
- (6) A society consists of many kinds of elites. There may be a governing elite, a power elite, a national elite, elites occupying high status, etc. Further there may be social elites, political elites, economic elites and so on. These various categories of elites represent the highest indices in their own branches of activity.
- (7) *There is a continuous alteration or movement of elites in a democratic system.*
- (8) In democracy, the political elites consist of persons who are duly elected by the people. Political power is exercised by political elites in the name of the people. In actual practice, democracy is an elitist system.
- (9) The concept of elite postulates that behind every talk or ideal of equality there is inequality in actual practice. The elites rule the masses. The elites exercise power over the masses in the name of "Popular Will", "General Will" and "Consent of the Governed."
- (10) *Elites grow and develop in every society and compete for power.*
- (11) In democratic systems, the memberships of the political elites are open to all the people. There is an ever-present circulation or alteration in the political elites.

CHANGING CHARACTER OF ELITES

The character of elite is dynamic. It changes from time to time and place to place. The changes in the society always produce rather compel changes in the character of an elite. For example, in a traditional society, kinship or family status provides basis to the ruling elite and in a feudal society the wealth or landed property constitutes the basis of elite. In a contemporary industrial society, characterised by a web of complex interdependent socio-economic-cultural relations, several factors provide basis to the elite.

According to Verney, *"In a modern democratic society, the elite owes its peculiar position of privilege to the recognition and esteem accorded to it by the masses. Should a society change its standard of values, for example, should the Age of Empire give way to the Age of Technology, a different set of men is awarded esteem and honour and forms the elite of a nation."* A change in values of a society always produces a change in the elite structure. Further, elites in the modern times have to "assume a broader complexion to include not only those who are at the top but also those who constitute the strata of society from which leaders usually emerge." The nature of elites of contemporary times is very different from the nature of elites in the past. Likewise, the future elites are bound to be different from the present elites.

Moreover, the membership of elite is always in flux. The top leaders of an elite are usually, in a position to remain in power only for a limited period. New members continuously keep on replacing the old members. The 'circulation of the elite' is a contin

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELITE RULE, OLIGARCHY AND ARISTOCRACY

In order to be clear about the nature of contemporary Political Elites, we must distinguish between the rule of the Elite and the rule of the 'Oligarchs' and 'Rule of Aristocracy.' All the three terms refer to rule of a minority over the society. In each of them the rulers are conceptualised as superior elements or chosen elements. However, along with these similarities there are fundamental differences between rule of the elite on the one hand and rule of the oligarchs on the other. "The point of similarity is the 'rule of the few', while the element of difference lies in the way in which the few come to hold and exercise power. "Elite rule depends upon the appreciation of the masses, while rule of the oligarchs depends upon the apathy, ignorance or weak and meek attitude of the down-trodden people."

Analysing the difference between Elite rule, Oligarchy and Aristocracy, Douglas V. Verney observes, *"An elite appears to combine some of the characteristics of both an Oligarchy and an Aristocracy but it is not to be confused with either. It is a minority, like an oligarchy, and consists of superior people, like an aristocracy, but there is neither the sense of self-perpetuation and selfishness which surrounds the former nor the pomp and grandeur which often is associated with the latter."* In other words, elite rule is a rule of minority but it is neither self-perpetuating nor selfish. Nevertheless, like Oligarchy, and Aristocracy, it does involve the promotion of vested interests.

Further, modern elites of democratic systems emerge out of the masses and rule with the tacit and general approval of the masses. The masses elect their ruling elites and recognise their power and ability to rule them. In Oligarchy and Aristocracy, the elite rule is based on kinship or family superiority or the thesis of 'celebrities and royal family.' Oligarchs rule by establishing their right to govern either because of their inherent right or family status or even physical ability to rule. In an aristocracy, the few rule because they are considered as 'the persons fit to rule.' In Oligarchy and Aristocracy, the rule of the few over the masses is imposed and it always tries to perpetuate itself. In the elite rule, the chosen minority rules with the consent of the masses and is accountable for its rule. In the words of Dr. J.C. Johri, *"The line of demarcation is traceable in the fact that elite rule lacks both traditional grandeur and tendency of self-perpetuation which are the hallmarks of the rule of the few known by the names of aristocracy or oligarchy."*

Concept of Elite rule is as such different from the traditional concepts of Oligarchy and aristocracy. Elite rule is a minority rule, backed by tacit and general consent of the masses. Oligarchy and Aristocracy involve the rule of a minority which thrives either on the interests of the masses in their doings, or on the apathy, ignorance, weakness and meekness of the masses.

FEATURES OF POWER ELITES/POLITICAL ELITES

- (1) A political elite or power elite consists of a minority of people—the chosen elements of the society.
- (2) *Political elites of a democratic system are backed by the general support and consent of the masses.*