Meaning of Approach:

From the days of ancient Greek political thought scholars, philosophers and political scientists have analysed, investigated various types of political issues and incidents from the standpoint of their own perspective and on the basis of the study they have arrived at conclusions and prescribed recommendations.

This has inevitably led to the emergence of a number of approaches to the study of political science. Now we shall first of all try to analyse various aspects of each approach but before that we shall define approach. We have already noted Van Dyke’s points on another issue. According to Van Dyke the word “approach is defined to denote the criteria employed in selecting the questions to ask and the data to consider in political inquiry”.

In the opinion of Van Dyke, approach means criteria. A criterion is used to explain or analyse the political questions and data. Since the questions and data are very great in number and varied in nature each political scientist or philosopher analyses them in his own way by applying his own standpoint and method.

In physical or chemical science there exists an agreed method and more or less all researchers and scientists apply those agreed methods. But there is hardly any place of broad based agreement in political science as to the method and approach.

Another aspect of approach is methods employed by political science for its study cannot be distinguished from the methods used by other branches of social science. So also the approaches of political science are not different from other approaches.

However, this general observation is not hundred percent correct. Sometimes the approaches employed by political scientists differ in content from the approaches used by other social scientists. Thus variety of approaches for the study of political science is a central aspect of the subject.

Again from the past history of political science we gather the idea that at different periods different approaches have gained importance. In other words, the rise and fall in the importance of approaches is a noticeable characteristic.

Approach, we can say, is a scientific way of studying a subject. The students will have to analyse and categorize data, facts, events, problems etc. The point to note is that they cannot do it unscientifically or proceed haphazardly. To be precise, for a balanced and effective analysis and promising investigation analysts must proceed in a systematic way and for that purpose the students or analysts must apply a method or criterion and we call it approach.

Therefore, approach is a way to analyse a subject or what may suitably be called a discipline. It is believed by many that the application of an approach considerably enhances the importance and credibility of the analysis as well as discipline. So without an approach the analysis of the subject may not be in a position to receive wide support from the readers and also their credence.

Classification of Approaches:

The approaches employed by political scientists for the study of politics have been classified by Wasby in the following way: one classification may be based on fact-value problem. This leads to the division of classification into normative approach and empirical approach.

The other classification is based on the objective of study of political science. That is, in this approach the political scientists want to stress the specific purposes of studying and investigating politics. This broad group can again be subdivided into philosophical, ideological, institutional and structural approaches.

Some scholars are of opinion that Wasby-proposed classification of approaches is generally traditional in nature. Modern political scientists have made a broad classification of the approaches. On the one hand there is normative approach which to some extent liberal bias and on the other hand Marxist approach.

In the second half of the last century a large number of political scientists of America and later on other countries began to analyse political issues, incidents and behaviour from the standpoint of behaviour (particularly the political behaviour) of the individuals. David Easton championed this approach.

In formal language it is called behaviouralism or political behaviour and after very few years this behaviouralism landed on post- behaviouralism. Recently some scholars have attempted to analyse political science in a feminist way and it is called feminist approach.

Normative Approach:

The Meaning and Origin of Normativeness:

The term normative is derived from the Latin word norma, meaning precept rule, carpenter’s square. The word norm means usual, typical or standard thing. Normative relates to norm or standard. The central idea of normative approach is—the subject is viewed and analysed normatively that is there are certain standards, rules and precepts which must find their application in political science.

Again, political science means in its operative aspects. When the state starts its operation its primary objective would be to achieve the above-noted norms, standards and precepts. The success and failure will determine the nature, credibility, acceptability of the state or government.

Hence norms are several principles which an authority cannot deny. The accountability of the authority is also based on these norms and principles. Norm or normativeness is explained in terms of “should” and “ought”. It means that the authority should do it or adopt such and such policy or decision. Or it ought to do it.

Therefore, normativeness talks about preference. The word preference is not different from should and ought. To sum up, the objectives and functions of state are judged in the background of preference, should and ought.

Origin of the Approach:

Normative approach to the study of politics owes its origin to the political philosophy of Greek philosopher Plato. The thought of a good society or an ideal state and the entire structure of such a state are built upon the concepts like ‘should’, ‘ought’, ‘preference’ etc. He said that any state or society ought to be or should be ideal or good and he has elaborated the criteria of good or ideal in his The Republic.

The picture of state that prevailed in Plato’s time was very far from of what ought to be or should be. In most of the city-states in Plato’s time there was no place and recognition of morality, virtue, ideals and ethics. But he firmly believed that a state ought to have these eternal values and he also said that in order to be an ideal state all individuals must be ideal that is they must possess virtues such as morality and various ethical qualities.

His great disciple Aristotle followed the footsteps of Plato and elaborated the ideal state. In latter periods we come across a number of philosophers who emphasised the normative approach of politics and the great contractualist Rousseau is a prominent figure.

The normative approach stressed by Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau etc has assumed the form and colour of Utopia. Utopia means something which has no practical foundations and it is not supported by reasons. Large number of philosophers began to scan the existing systems by Utopian criteria. Again with the help of this standard existing situations are to be judged.

Thomas More (1478-1535) imagined of a Utopia or an imaginary state. His famous book Utopia was published in 1516 and here he depicted the picture of an ought to be state. He disapproved the drawbacks that characterised the prevailing state of his time and that led him to think of an ought to be state.

Central Idea of Normative Approach:

The central idea of the normative approach to the study of politics is politics or analysis of state or the functions of state are to be viewed in the light of what ought to be rather that what they are. The normativeness wants to give preference to should and ought to be. It wants the realisations of certain universal values, norms or principles through, the machinery of state. “Instead of asking how social policy decisions have come to be made, it asks instead about how they ought to be made. In such studies the aim is to examine a set of political principles, detail their logical characteristics and explore their implications for social policy, at least in broad institutional terms”.

It is assumed by some that since normative principles relates to what should be or ought to be these principles can easily be ignored. But the great adherents of the approach declare unambiguously that norms, or principles are not to be ignored but they are to be implemented. “Normative theory should be a reflection on practice, not a means of ignoring it”.

Thus we can say that values, principles or eternal ideas relating to politics or function of state constituted the central idea of normative approach to the study of politics. In other words, this approach says that norms or principles are to be followed in practice and the aim of such norms is to make the political organisation acceptable to all or majority people.

Components of the Normative Approach:

In the normative approach there is an emphasis on what is good and what is not good. It says that when a policy-maker proceeds to formulate policy or adopt a decision he must see that to what extent the policy or decision will produce desired results. The concept of goodness is linked with expectation.

The members of political organisation want to fulfill their manifold desires and they expect that the authority shall act accordingly. It may be that the expectations do not always tally the real results. But that does not matter. The expectations fall in the category of “ought to be”. Good also relates to the attainment of welfare objectives of the state. The term good starts to scan the policy, decision and function of authority.

The normative approach establishes the concept of responsibility. If certain norms and principles are put forward and if they are made binding on the authority, people can judge the success or failure of the authority. In other words, norms are easy of locating the responsibility.

Normative approach stipulates that norms or principles are of immense value and importance so far as the determination of policy and decision and their implementation are concerned. ‘Is’ or ‘what’ is happening, are important no doubt but every authority must follow these norms and ideals.

Normative approach envisages of striking a balance or equilibrium between what is or what happens and ought to be or should be. Any biasness will invariably plague the proper functioning of state as well as decision making process.

An authority aiming at the attainment of general welfare objectives cannot take the risk of neglecting either ought to be or what is. The balancing process is not a stable one. It is always in an unstable condition. It moves from one stage to another.

Normative approach never thinks of anything settled. Though it is generally argued that norms, values, principles are of eternal in nature but scholars are of opinion that the word ‘eternal’ need not be taken seriously.

Values, norms etc. are always subject to change and a responsible authority must take this change into account and also will act accordingly. That is normative approach though pays heavy emphasis on norms it proceeds with the change. In every age certain norms, values and principles are given more importance and they are given priority.

Importance of Normative Approach:

It is now evident that in normative approach there is lot of importance of norms, values, ideals, ideas. It further believes that they have got relevance in the study of politics. It is a fact that all these cannot be translated into reality. But on this ground the norms, values, etc. cannot be thrown into the wind. They have importance and a large number of political scientists and statesmen still believe that the norms have immense importance.

The normative approach criticises the functions, principles and policies of the existing states as did Plato in his The Republic. Even today the same approach is followed. The criticism by the supporters of the normative approach has not always succeeded in changing the prevailing course of action of the state or the un-normative principles of the authority.

But it has been able to aware the public about the state of activities of political organisation. This approach suggests that what is going on should be changed for the better. It is still believed that the normative approach can be helpful for the day to day activities of state.

It is alleged that normative approach to the study of politics is a smack of norms, ideals, values and principles which have not full relevance to the reality of social and political situation. But this criticism is not tenable. As every individual should decide certain principles which he wants, to follow, a state should also decide or set up certain ideals, norms and principles which it should apply while deciding policies and taking decisions.

All these are declared in various forms such as constitution, laws and general policy decisions. After deciding the principles or general objectives the state proceeds to implement them. This can be illustrated by the Constitution of India. The Preamble to our Constitution contains several lofty ideals and many of them are yet to be achieved. But this non-implementation does not invalidate the ideals.

The rise of welfare state and its increasing popularity have added new feathers to this approach. The concept of welfare state declares that the function of the state does not exhaust in maintaining law and order alone, it must perform many other functions which will bring about general welfare to the society. The welfare objectives on the one hand and ideals, norms, principles on the other hand are always at par. The welfare objectives pay more importance upon the ought to be or should be.

The function of the state is not a static one. In a dynamic society it should also be dynamic. It means that the state should make continuous efforts for the improvement of its functions and this again means that there should be certain ideals, principles and norms before it. Otherwise it will have to sail in an uncharted sea. But a pragmatic theory of state does not suggest that the state should sail in an uncharted sea. The fact is that the state should decide certain ideals and then it will begin its journey.

It is apprehended that there may arise conflict between practice and ideals or between “is” and “ought to be” and this conflict may dwarf the activities of the state. There is also a possibility that the norms could not be fulfilled. But the non-fulfilment does not call for its rejection. Norms are always norms and they always act as guiding stars.

Plato’s ideal state, philosopher king, Aristotle’s polity, Marx’s classless state or society, his communism, Rousseau’s moral state etc still haunt us. We all know that all these can never be achieved but we still hope that we must try to achieve them because they are our ideals.

It is not surprising that in the writings and thought systems of every philosopher there is an important place of ideals and principles and this place is very much important. Take the case of utilitarianism. Its great pro pounders proposed that the state authority must follow the principle of pleasure and pain or in general the policy of utility while making policy or taking decisions. The utilitarianism has not been strictly followed or it is ignored, but it still holds good as a policy of liberalism.

The supporters of the normative approach say that this hints at the efficiency of the state. Once the norms and ideals are declared the authority of the state should make arrangement for their implementation any discrepancy between promises and performance will call for a valuation of the activities. If the discrepancy stands at a minimum level that will be an indication of the efficiency of the state.

Some political scientists claim that an adequate and comprehensive political theory must duly take into account of the normative approach to the study of politics. Legal approach and empirical approach have importance no doubt. But normative approach has importance.