

Aristotle's Concept of Citizenship

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Introduction

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the Greek philosopher and disciple of Plato, is often called the 'Father of Political Science'. In his famous work 'Politics', he discusses the concept of citizenship in detail. Aristotle's theory of citizenship is considered one of the earliest systematic accounts of the subject. He connected the idea of citizenship with the functioning of the polis (city-state) and defined it in terms of participation in governance. His views have greatly influenced Western political thought.

Definition of Citizenship

According to Aristotle, a citizen is not simply someone who lives in a city or enjoys its rights and privileges. For him, a true citizen is one who participates in the administration of justice and in offices of governance. In other words, citizenship is defined by active participation in political and judicial functions of the state.

Features of Aristotle's Citizenship

1. Active Participation – A citizen must actively participate in decision-making and governance of the state.
2. Political and Legal Functions – Citizenship is defined by taking part in law-making, judicial duties, and holding public office.

3. Not Based on Residence Alone – Merely living in a city does not make a person a citizen.
4. Exclusion of Certain Groups – Women, slaves, laborers, and foreigners were excluded from citizenship in Aristotle's time.
5. Citizenship and Polis – Citizenship was meaningful only within the framework of the polis (city-state).

Types of Citizens According to Aristotle

Aristotle recognized that different types of constitutions produce different forms of citizenship. For example, citizens in a democracy are different from citizens in an oligarchy or aristocracy. Thus, the nature of citizenship is closely linked to the constitution of the state.

Importance of Citizenship

1. Foundation of the State – Citizenship defines the political community and gives it identity.
2. Ensures Political Stability – Active citizen participation maintains stability and order in the state.
3. Moral Development – Citizenship develops moral and civic virtues among individuals.
4. Collective Good – Citizens work for the welfare of the community, not just personal gain.
5. Defines Rights and Duties – Citizenship determines who has rights and responsibilities in the polis.

Good Citizen vs Good Man

Aristotle made a distinction between a good citizen and a good man. A good citizen is one who performs his duties in accordance with the constitution of the state. However, a good man is one who lives a virtuous life in accordance with moral principles. While every good man may not be a good citizen, the ideal is to combine both qualities.

Limitations of Aristotle's Citizenship

1. Exclusionary – It excluded women, slaves, laborers, and foreigners from political participation.
2. City-State Bound – Citizenship was limited to small city-states and could not be applied to larger states.
3. Class Bias – Favored the elite and educated classes, ignoring the majority population.
4. Outdated Today – Modern citizenship is universal and inclusive, unlike Aristotle's restricted view.

Relevance of Aristotle's Concept Today

Despite its limitations, Aristotle's theory of citizenship remains relevant today. The idea that citizens must actively participate in governance and not remain passive observers is central to modern democracy. His emphasis on civic duties, moral responsibility, and the role of education in shaping good citizens has enduring significance.

Conclusion

Aristotle's concept of citizenship highlights the importance of active participation in political life. For him, a citizen was not merely a resident but a participant in governance and justice. Although his definition was narrow and excluded many groups, the essence of his theory – that citizenship involves rights, duties, and responsibilities – continues to influence political theory. In modern times, citizenship has expanded to include equality, inclusiveness, and universal rights, but Aristotle's emphasis on civic virtue and political participation still forms the core of democratic life.