

Kautilya and Non-Western IR Theory by Deepshikha Shahi,
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The recognition of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as a foundational text of international relations (IR) theory has been a cumbersome process, both in India and internationally. The IR community has exhibited a rather neurotic attitude towards Kautilya, ranging from outright denial of his relevance for the discipline to hesitant admission that there are conceptual elements in the *Arthashastra* which have theoretical eigenvalue as well as relevance for empirical research. The reasons for this uptightness are Eurocentrism and, in the case of Indian academia, lasting post-colonial unease with endogenous intellectual resources. Moreover, very few in the IR community have actually studied Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and since their knowledge is second hand, it is inevitably fragmentary and biased.

A refreshing exception is Deepshikha Shahi's *Kautilya and Non-Western IR Theory*. The author unambiguously states that Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a classic of IR theory, which provides lasting insights and intellectual stimulus for IR theorising. Indeed, Shahi pursues an unusual line of thought to bring Kautilya into the IR discourse. She aims at the 'reinvention of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*' (p. 131) as a key resource of 'non-Western eclectic theory of IR' (p. 137). To this end, she argues that Kautilya has to be first liberated from the clutches of Western political realism. However, her pathway of recasting Kautilya in terms of non-

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Western, eclectic and social constructivist IR theory is not without some serious problems, which are quite evident in the book.

Since an unmediated intellectual access to the idea-contents of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (or any other text for that matter) is impossible, interrogating this work does necessarily involve presuppositions. Whoever studies the *Arthashastra* has a preset mental map of thought-figures through which the text is to be understood. Therefore, the crucial question is whether the 'presentist' (modern and Eurocentric) IR categories employed in the textual analysis are structurally homologous with the *Arthashastra*'s idea-contents. So far, the few IR theorists who have seriously studied this work have mostly done so in the theoretical framework of twentieth century political realism, as articulated by Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr.

Shahi acknowledges that key features of political realism do indeed correspond to Kautilya's core concepts. However, she argues that 'narrow re-readings in terms of Political Realism/realpolitik have done profound injustices to this extraordinarily comprehensive classical text' (p. 3). By ignoring its 'extra-Political Realist elements', Kautilya's *Arthashastra* has been given 'an essentially immoral, deterministic, and nativist disposition, thereby unduly reducing it to a narrow non-Western theoretical instrument fit to replicate the same age-old Western Political Realist conceptual categories' (p. 129).

One wonders, who might fit this verdict? Among political scientists, one might think of Benoy Kumar Sarkar¹ and more recently, Roger Boesche.² This verdict certainly does not fit Max Weber, who was the first Western social scientist to recognize Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as a foundational text in the evolution of political thought.³ Hans Morgenthau mentions Kautilya in his *Dilemmas of Politics*,⁴ but surely not with a political immorality slant. Shahi dislikes comparisons between Kautilya and Machiavelli, apparently because she sees Machiavelli as a singular proponent of political amorality. However, a careful reading of *The Prince* and the *Discorsi*⁵ shows that the attribution of scrupulous political amorality to Machiavelli is unsustainable.

With respect to deterministic misinterpretations of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Shahi has mainly the *mandala*—that is, a concentric circles of states—scheme in mind, which is often misconceived as postulating the 'iron rule' that a state's direct neighbours are automatically its adversaries, while distant neighbours are its friends. Shahi firmly rejects such mechanistic-geometrical understanding of Kautilya's *mandala* scheme.

Instead, she argues, it is Kautilya's anticipation of social constructivism that provides the key for understanding his *mandala* scheme.

Shahi's rejection of deterministic readings of Kautilya's configuration of inter-state relations is surely correct, but her alternative constructivist explanation is rather difficult to comprehend. Rather than being the result of the construction of identities, perceptions and interests, I would like to argue that relations among states are shaped by a complex mix of capabilities, correlations of forces, intentions and values. All four factors are featured in the *Arthashastra* and are congruent with political realism.

It is also difficult to understand Shahi's concern about 'nativism' with respect to Kautilya. After all, as she herself affirms, Kautilya has been marginalised in the global IR discourse and setting the record straight is urgently required. The *Arthashastra* is certainly the most substantial text of pre-modern political science. In this discipline, in contrast to philosophy as such, Kautilya does measure up to Aristotle's and Plato's contributions to political theorising. Any serious comparison between Kautilya and Machiavelli will conclude that the latter's political works do not match the scholarly depth, nor the comprehensiveness, of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. That said, there is much conceptual 'family resemblance' (in Wittgenstein's terminology) between the two political thinkers. Maybe Shahi is influenced by her older colleague, Kanti Bajpai, who is ever-worried about 'nativism' when it comes to the *Arthashastra* and opines that Kautilya cannot measure up to Machiavelli.

Shahi repeatedly praises the comprehensiveness of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and mentions that beyond the IR context, the work is a foundational text also for other sub-disciplines of political science, notably public administration and intelligence studies.

Quite correctly, Shahi highlights 'Kautilya's Political Realism between realpolitik and moralpolitik' (p. 43); and she is quite right in pointing to the *Arthashastra's* philosophical foundation: *anvikshiki* comprised of a blending of *samkhya*, *yoga* and *lokayata*. She argues convincingly that *anvikshiki* is not compatible with amoral power politics. Actually, further elaboration of the concept of *anvikshiki* and its normative-rational dual dimensionality would have been highly desirable.

Kautilya's normative stance is the dialectics of deontological normativity (*dharma*) and purposive political rationality: advancing the welfare of the people strengthens the state and vice versa. Optimising the 'seven constituents of the state' (*saptanga*) is enhancing the well-being of the people and the security of the state. In foreign affairs, the

optimisation of the state factors provides more leeway for non-violent conflict resolution (*upayas* and *shadgunya*). Both for reasons of morality and political rationality, war is *ultima ratio* for Kautilya. It would have helped Shahi's argumentation if she had addressed the normative dimensions of the *upayas* and *shadgunya* clusters more thoroughly.

One would have thought that Shahi's emphasis of Kautilya's fusion of realpolitik and moralpolitik would have made her at least mention the singular figure in modern IR theory who first and foremost put forth such a fusion: John Herz in his seminal work, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities*.⁶ Shahi writes that 'Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a seminal treatise on Political Realism. However, its real theoretical value subsists in its extra-Political Realist philosophical outlook' (p. 43). Had she read John Herz, she would have realised the evident structural homologies between Kautilya's pre-modern and Herz' modern IR theory of combining realism and idealism. Like Morgenthau, Herz was Jewish German-American IR theorist and is better known for first articulating the 'security dilemma' concept.

For Shahi, 'Asoka's Mauryan Empire is a remarkable exemplar of Kautilyan "Political realism between realpolitik and moralpolitik"' (p. 57). This unconventional proposition is refreshing, yet risky. In the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya puts forth an ideal-type polity, which is grounded in the empirical reality of his times; however, it is no historiographic description of the Mauryan Empire. To take Ashoka's rule as the historical test case for Kautilyan thought and conflate *anvikshiki* with Buddhist ethics (*dhamma*) is problematic. Yet, Shahi's argument that Ashoka was standing on the shoulders of Kautilyan statecraft seems valid.

Though Shahi does neglect John Herz, she has covered Alexander Wendt: 'A careful reading of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* reveals a striking resemblance with Wendt's Social Constructivism' (p. 101). Moreover, she states that 'core claims of Wendt's Social Constructivism found logical expression in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*' (p. 138). Here, again, 'presentist' (modern and Eurocentric) IR categories are used for the understanding of Kautilyan thought. In place of the alleged 'straightjacket' of political realism, Shahi employs Wendt's social constructivism for grasping Kautilyan thought. Although doing that is perfectly legitimate in scholarly terms, her elaboration of the homologies between Kautilya and Wendt with respect to international politics is not so convincing. Is Kautilya's *shadgunya* cluster of foreign policy options really an expression of 'constructing identities and interests'? Yet, one should remain open-

minded. Severe doubts notwithstanding, her constructivist–‘reflectivist’ approach to Kautilya might lead to some productive outcomes.

Similarly, Shahi argues that Kautilya’s methodology is ‘eclecticism’, as shown by *anvikshiki* combining contrarious orthodox and heterodox philosophical strands. However, her analysis of the *Arthashastra*’s Book XV on methodology is a far less convincing in arguing for Kautilya’s presumed eclecticism. Her main reference on modern ‘eclecticism’ in IR theory is a 2010 article by Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein with little further elaboration.⁷ However, the question arises whether the ‘recasting of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* as a non-Western eclectic theory of IR’ (p. 137) is not contradicting Shahi’s own stated goal of overcoming ‘the dilemmas of “presentism” that currently obstruct the fruitful reading of the classical text of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* in the academic discipline of IR’ (p. 143). In her analysis of the text, modern Western political realism is substituted by post-modern Western constructivism, eclecticism and other ‘reflectivist’ approaches.

In the book, Shahi expresses the hope that ‘Kautilyan non-Western eclectic theory could possibly enhance both Indian IR and Global IR’ (p. 143). We too hope that Kautilyan thought will contribute to the conceptual enhancement of global IR. In fact, one might think of a genuinely unconventional approach for situating Kautilya in global IR theory.

The starting point for our intellectual scenario is that inter-state politics have been a subject of intellectual curiosity and theorising for millennia. In other words, IR was not ‘invented’ a century ago in Aberystwyth. Written in the fourth century BC, Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* is a genuine classic of IR theory. Classical texts retain their thought-provoking efficacy and often diffuse in a hybrid mode across cultural and temporal spaces. Such transcultural, hybrid idea migration from South Asia to West Asia, and on to Europe, is well documented for the classic *Panchatantra*, an ancient political ‘mirror for princes’ text from South Asia. Similarly, it seems quite plausible that, if not the whole text, then at least key thought-figures from such an outstanding and politically valuable text as Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* would have ‘migrated’ to other cultural spaces across time. Up to the fifteenth century, the predominant directionality of idea migrations was from the East to the West, and only thereafter the reverse direction became dominant. Thus, in the field of political science and IR theory, we might come to the realisation that Kautilya, Sun-Tzu, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Morgenthau, Herz and Wendt

have all been part of a transcultural evolutionary process of political science and IR theory. That would imply that Western-Eurocentric IR theory has lot more non-Western Kautilyan genes than so far assumed.

It might be difficult for American and European IR theorists to accept that the foundations of their discipline were laid in South Asia, as it is evidently difficult for Indian scholars to realise that their own endogenous intellectual resources have played a critically important role in the evolution of political science and IR theory. As an unintended consequence, Deepshikha Shahi's book on Kautilya might turn out to be a contribution to a new understanding of the evolution of global IR.

NOTES

1. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 'Hindu Theory of International Relations', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1919, pp. 400–14.
2. Roger Boesche, *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and his Arthashastra*, Lanham, USA: Lexington Books, 2002.
3. cf. Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale [trans.], Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2000.
4. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958.
5. cf. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses*, New York: The Modern Library, 1950.
6. John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951.
7. Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein, 'Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms Across Research Traditions', American Political Science Association, 2010 Annual Meeting Paper.