Kautilya's *Arthashastra*
The Intellectual Foundations of Ancient Indian Political Thought

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Introduction

The intellectual foundations and the strategic vocabulary of contemporary geopolitical discourse is characterised by two elements—its heavy borrowing from the ancient civilisations of the Near East, Greece, Rome, and even China; and a near complete omission of anything Indian. If the 'axial age'[1] in these geographies represented a critical, reflective turn of transcendental significance to social, political and philosophical affairs, the contemporaneous Indian civilisational experience can offer worthy contributions, in both confirming the universality of strategic traditions abroad and establishing its cultural peculiarity. Perhaps, the most consequential output (from the standpoint of the ancient Indian state and statecraft) of the intense cultural interactions between different philosophical and intellectual traditions in India, emerging since the 6th century BCE, is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*—a classic Indian treatise on statecraft.

The text was written in a politico-cultural context marked by an Indian geo-cultural space with the drive to establish a pan-Indian empire. Even when the debate on its periodisation and authorship is unsettled, ranging from the 6th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, single to multiple

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authorship, original work to edited composition, it is widely believed that the compositional history of this work dates to the period of the Maurya Empire (321 BCE–185 BCE), with later redactions up to the early centuries CE.

This commentary will explore and establish the foundational principles of ancient Indian statecraft that undergird its particularity, broadly shaped by the complex interplay of different strands of indigenous culture and geography.

Text and Context

Any credible investigation into a historical text assumes placing its source of intelligibility in both the context in which it was produced, and the text itself. Bhikhu Parekh and R.N. Berki consider that the 'abstractness of a text (a piece of writing on politics) is in an inverse relationship to its relevance to a specific audience and a historical context'.[2] The degree of generality in the *Arthashastra* is sufficient to push the bounds of time and space. And yet it can be most clearly understood within the context of the intellectual moorings of the time. The breakthrough ideas in the text are not *ex nihilo* but refracted through pre-existent cultural traditions. M.V. Krishna Rao[3] notes,

> The history of the tradition of Indian politics is as old as the Vedas and the politics was known in the early Smritis and Puranas, as Dandniti, whose content was the crystallisation of Artha Shastra and Dharma Shastra tradition. Though there are references to the existence of the political texts earlier than the fourth century BC, perhaps the most popular and thoroughly scientific and authoritative interpretation is the Arthashastra of Kautilya.

If the linearity in tradition is striking, so is the plurality. The amalgam of the foundations of the Vedic period (between the second and first half of the first millennium BCE), renunciatory turn symbolised by Buddhism and Jainism, Epic literature, Upanishadic teachings, and various schools of Indian philosophy (*Darshanas*), with emphasis on observation and reflection, together provided the fertile ground for the emergence of Kautilya's political theory. Upinder Singh[4] comments on the pivotal turn that the Arthashastra came to symbolise,

> Kautilya defined a political sphere, injected a strong dose of pragmatic reason and argument into political discourse, and made a strong case for the regulation and perhaps even mitigation of the random violence and capriciousness that must have characterised ancient states.

In this passage of ancestry of thoughts, Kautilya's idea of statecraft itself evolved into a tradition which was both preserved and contested by subsequent texts, following what Harry Eckstein would call 'pattern maintaining change'.[5]

The near contemporaneous intellectual ferment in ancient China also witnessed the emergence of competing Chinese philosophical traditions—Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism, among others. Beset by prolonged war during the Spring and Autumn period (771–481 BCE) and the Warring States period (481–221 BCE), Confucius (551–479 BCE) turned to ethical foundations of society and advocated universal peace. Lord Shang (390–338 BCE) and Han Feizi (280–233 BCE) who synthesised the Legalist tradition, promoted political paramountcy through '"*fa*" (penal laws and other social institutions), "*shu*" (methods/statecraft), and "*shi*" (coercive power/authority)'.[6] While there were rich conversations between them, the Legalists effected a rupture with Confucianism in crucial ways, the most fundamental being their conception of innate viciousness of man which ran counter to Confucian's 'original goodness'. In contrast, ancient Indian strategic thought is relatively united in its conception of human nature being driven by self-preservation, which in the absence of central authority, leads to 'law of the fish' (*Matsya-Nyaya*). The conceptualization of *Matsya-nyaya* is "more or less universal in Sanskrit and Pali texts which vividly portray a kingless state emphasizing the theory of *Matsya-nyaya* and then maintain the king as the upholder of moral and social life of the people".[7] If the author of the *Arthashastra* was concerned about the existing socio-political problems, and used extant vocabulary and linguistic devices, how does the text acquire a timeless appeal, and talk to audiences of different historical contexts? The answer to this question illuminates the intrinsic value of the text itself. If grasping a historical text is partially contingent on decoding the intention of the author, Kautilya makes it amply clear that his work is a theoretical treatise (*sastra*) that lays down the rules for governance for all times to come; the deliberate avoidance of any historical context or examples lends the treatise universality. The intended use for posterity is supported by the text's political anthropology being firmly tethered to the immutable human nature and the 'laws of the fish' that still govern relations among nations.

The text's intellectual tone, ensconced in reason and rationality, is its greatest appeal. The very first *sutra* (verse) establishes the text as a compilation of the teachings of as many treatises on the Science of Politics as have been composed by ancient teachers. And yet it bases his adoption or rejection of them, in specific strategic contexts, on observation and

empiricism. It is admittedly a combination of theory (*sastra*) and practice (*prayoga*). This scientific tenor is also incorporated in the training manual of the King as *Anvikshiki* (Science of Inquiry). The core branches of knowledge in the *Arthashastra* are *Anvikshiki* (Science of Inquiry), *Trayi* or the *Vedas*, *Varta* (Economics) and *Dandaniti* (Political Science). While critical inquiry/philosophy is projected as an autonomous discipline, it is seen as the lamp for all branches of knowledge, means in all activities, and support for all duties and obligations. It is with this scientific temper of combining received belief with observation that Kautilya would have hoped his work to be read.

For Quentin Skinner, a crucial problem in reading historical texts lies in identifying the gap between what the author said and what they may have intended to say. Words, concepts, idioms and phrases are unique to the historical period in which the text is written, and the literal meaning of key terms may change over time. Additionally, the author may use 'oblique strategies' to both lay out and hide what they mean by what they say. Kautilya's use and enumeration of *Tantrayuktis* (linguistic, stylised devices that aid the composition of a text to convey intended ideas clearly) in Book 15, appreciably overcomes this problem. The oldest available *Trantrayukti* list of 32 devices (some inclusions being *Padartha*—meaning of the word, *Hetvartha*—reason, *Apdesha*—reference, *Vyakhyan*—emphasis, *Nidarshanam*—illustration, *Ekanta*—invariable rule, *Uhyam*—what is understood) had its mention in the *Arthashastra* and the methodology held a pan-Indian sway on treatises across disciplines for 1,500 years.[8]

Realism and Idealism

In the process of invoking past traditions and interweaving contemporaneous ones, Kautilya creatively arrives at a unique formula to acquire and maintain power that bridges the gap between realism and idealism, rationality and normativity, and ought and is. He catapults the notions of the state and statecraft into a realm that intertwines the strategies of the king for political paramountcy and empire building, including a balanced application of force, with maintaining the security and prosperity of the subjects, through an artful explication of the discipline of political economy.

> *The source of livelihood (vritti) of men is wealth (artha), in other words, the earth inhabited by human beings. The science which is the means of the acquisition and protection of the earth is Arthashastra.*[9]

The well-being of the people ensures political legitimacy and the consequent economic production strengthens the rod (*danda*) wielded by the king in the interstate realm, thereby enhancing state security. Conquest, consolidation and preservation are inextricably linked to material happiness of the people. For Kautilya, *Artha* (material well-being) is supreme; *Dharma* (righteousness) and *Kama* (pleasure) are dependent on it.

The benevolence of the treatise is not rhetorical, it is interwoven in various aspects of statecraft. Kautilya places *Janapada* (people and territory) third in the hierarchy (preceded by ruler and ministers) of the constituent elements of the state (*Prakritis*), which together make up comprehensive national power. King is essentially seen as an entrepreneur—the most active participant in wealth creation—facilitating land settlements, creating markets and encouraging private participation, regulating the international trade environment, developing infrastructure through roads, waterways and highways, and judiciously utilising natural resources. For Kautilya, *Yogakshema* (political end goal of prosperity and security) could be achieved through the political unification of the Indian subcontinent—a geo-cultural space that was naturally defensible and relatively cohesive in terms of culture and ethos—a feat that was largely achieved with the Maurya Empire (324/321–187 BCE).

The Kautilyan ruler is concomitantly the upholder of law and order, arbiter of disputes and taxing authority, all of which he is expected to carry out with prudence and justness. The interactions between *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (material well-being) and *Danda* (use of force) defined Kautilya's political sphere. The king was enjoined through *Rajadharma* (duties of kingship) to establish and regulate social order with a nuanced and just use of force, which created an environment of social unity and economic well-being. All disputes were settled based on law (*Dharmashastra*—extant legal text books), transaction (witnesses), customs (commonly held view of men) and royal edict, with each later one superseding the earlier one. The king's authority was absolute yet circumscribed by pre-existing rules and social norms.

While the Chinese at this time were similarly overwhelmed by disorder caused by inter-dynastic wars and engaged in empire-building through conquest, resulting in a unified China under Qin Shi Huangdi (259–210), the Legalists, and Lord Shang in particular, sought to revise laws to establish a warrior state. The laws promulgated by the ruler did not abide by a moral standard (and repudiated the Confucian social order of ruling by virtue), but if obeyed indisputably, would bring about happiness of the people:

'Punishment produces force, force produces strength, strength produces awe, awe produces kindness. Kindness has its origin in force.'[10] As conquest was important for political paramountcy, Lord Shang wanted to make people 'delight in war' and established a 'citizen warrior' ethic, quite apart from the pre-existing social ethic.[11]

Materialism/*Artha* was certainly absent as an input in framing laws in China of this period. The goals of *Trivarga* (*Artha-Dharma-Kama*) and the interoperability between them—'Material wealth is the root of spiritual good and has pleasure for its fruits….'—did not particularly appeal to the Legalists, though their preoccupation with efficiency in agriculture was obliquely related to the idea that scarcity inescapably leads to conflict and mediocrity. Pleasure as a goal of human existence was surely shunned. Importantly, the agency of a saintly-king (*Rajarshi*) ever active in bringing about good governance in the *Arthashastra* can be contrasted with Han Feizi's vision of a ruler whose power is augmented by non-action (*wu wei*), and who after formalising the laws recedes into the background.

Both Kautilya and the Legalists are united on the changeability of laws. Though the *Dharmashastras* (legal texts) was referenced to settle disputes which arose around transactions and customs, the royal edict reigned supreme when in contradiction with the legal text. The king, trained in scientific temper with intentness on truth, continually weighed the relevance of the injunctions of the legal texts based on context and pragmatism. The Legalists, in a similar vein, saw laws as 'created' by rulers based on pragmatic rather than moral standards and therefore they were not immutable. Discernible efforts to make laws likeable, based on prudence or tradition in the *Arthashastra*, stands out against the brute force of Legalism. While both endeavoured to ensure happiness of the people, Kautilya was arguably more compassionate and righteous alongside being expedient from his Chinese counterpart.

Use of Force

If the political end goal of Kautilya's text was the unification of the Indian subcontinent from a fragmented political landscape, the author surely understood the utility of force. He was the prime minister (key adviser) to the Mauryan Emperor, Chandragupta Maurya (317–293 BCE), who after successfully overcoming the advance of Alexander and defeating the Nanda king, established the Mauryan Empire. Max Weber, in his famous lecture 'Politics as a Vocation' remarked, 'A really radical "Machiavellianism" in the

popular sense of this word, is classically represented in Indian literature, in the Kautilya Arthasastra'.[12]

To be sure, the king enjoined by *Rajadharma* (duties of kingship) in the political environment of 'law of the fish' would have made wars a recurrent phenomenon. The discussion on different kinds of war, i.e., *Dharmayuddha* (righteous war), *Kutayuddha* (deceptive war) and *Tusnimyuddha* (silent war), and types of conquerors, i.e., *Dharmavijai* (righteous victor), *Lobhavijai* (greedy victor) and *Asuravijai* (demoniacal victor) in the text is testament to that.

Yet, the clearest message to the reader is the use of force as the last resort. From the materialist stance of the text, wars caused *kshya* (losses), *vyaya* (expenses) and *pravasa* (to be away from home) and therefore there is preference for minimally violent stratagems. *Mantra Shakti* (power of counsel) is ranked above *Prabhav Shakti* (power of the economy and military might) and *Utsah Shakti* (power of valour). Knowledge and sound counsel are depicted as the bedrock of statecraft, undermining the use of brute force—'The king with the eyes of intelligence and political science can overcome rival kings even if they possess greater economic and military resources and personal valour.'[13] In the context of the importance of intelligence in the *Arthashastra*, Danny Shoham thinks, 'collecting information, and sober, thorough and objective intelligence analysis, and assessment is the condition sine qua non for a foreign policy which meets his strategic (and normative) requirements.'[14] The four methods of politics (*Upayas*) are also ranked in the following order—conciliation (*Sama*), gift giving (*Dana*), Dissension (*Bheda*) and force (*Danda*). However, the exclusive, alternate or combined use of these depends on the strategic context.

An important non-military means of state security was internal rectification and good governance. An internally stable order achieved through the qualities of rulership and policy-making created an objective condition for both internal and external security in the Kautilyan polity.

Rory Cox traces just war doctrines to the ancient Near East around 5,000 years ago. Framed as 'absolutist struggles' between the 'good' and the 'evil', he avers that ancient wars rendered *jus ad bellum* (rights or justice to go to war) 'religiously and ideologically charged' with a zero-sum conceptualisation, and consequently nullified *jus in bello* (norms of conduct during war) and never discussed *jus post bellum* duties.[15] Honour and interest were the twin motives for classical Greece before the Peloponnesian War, and military valour was supreme for Roman Republics.

Ancient Indian political thought too has been concerned with when and what kind of wars are legitimate, but the neat binaries and fixed standards of 'just' and 'unjust' of the Western traditions of war fail to appreciate both contextualism and variable conceptualisations between zero and positive sum of the classical Indian counterpart. Kautilya's righteous war doctrine hinges primarily on advancement (*vriddhi*) of state interests and identification of the kind of enemy. He differentiates between an unrighteous inveterate enemy which must be eliminated, and other adversaries in the neighbourhood who require nuanced tackling through means other than force. The ready acceptance of shades of grey in interstate relations is unique to this genre.

Torkel Brekke draws a clear distinction between Epic and *Dharmashastra* literature and *Arthashastra* literature, the former being associated with heroism, proportionality, just means in war and a deontological tradition ignoring *jus ad bellum*, and the latter with prudence and a consequentialist tradition which overlooks proportionality and disregards *jus in bello*.[16] Further, unlike European just war tradition, classical Hindu political thinkers did not evince interest in a just resort to war because they did not distinguish between wars against external enemies and violence against domestic enemies.

Both the above assertions are untrue. The *Rajadharma* of *Shantiparvan* of the *Mahabharata* talks about the '*dharma* of distress' (*Apaddharma*), where recourse to unrighteous means was justifiable. The *Arthashastra* points to specific categories of persons not to be attacked in the battlefield, upholding *jus in bello*. Kautilya's categorical advice to employ all possible means except using force for popular discontent amongst the citizenry stands in contrast to the prescription to use all possible means against foreign aggression, and clearly shows a demarcation between external and internal enemies.

Ancient civilisations were, perhaps, faced with an existential and therefore universal '*problematique*', but it elicited a set of answers that may appear structurally homologous but characteristically diverse—occasioning both convergences and divergences across geographies. The intra-regional variance in approach is testament to plurality within a given cultural and historical context as well. Therefore, generalisations both between and within civilisations are largely unfounded. However, if there is one text that most vividly represents the classical Indian strategic and philosophical tradition with substantive influence on subsequent works, that is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Perhaps because the treatise epitomises the tradition of analysing received wisdom and synthesising it with observation, proving 'continuity can be reconciled with changes, albeit only changes of particular kinds'.[17]

Notes

1. Karl Jaspers coined the term 'axial age' to describe the period around 500 BCE in particular, and around 800 and 200 BCE in general, which marked a 'spiritual process' almost simultaneously in India, China and the West. See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Routledge, New York, 2021.
2. Bhikhu Parekh and R.N. Berki, 'The History of Political Ideas: A Critique of Q. Skinner's Methodology', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 34, No. 2, April–June 1973, p. 174.
3. M.V. Krishna Rao, *Studies in Kautilya's Arthashastra*, Kautilya Mandali Publication, Mysore, 1953, p. 1.
4. Upinder Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts/London, 2017, p. 118.
5. Harry Eckstein, 'Culturalist Theory of Political Change', *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 82, No. 3, 1988, pp. 789–804.
6. Yongjin Zhang, 'The Idea of Order in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: A Wightian Exploration', *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1, 2014, p. 181.
7. S.D. Trivedi, *Secret Services in Ancient India: Techniques and Operations*, Allied Publishers, 1984.
8. For more on *Tantrayuktis*, read Jayaraman, 'Tantrayukti - An Ancient Indian Scientific & Theoretical Text Construction Manual', *IndiaChapter.in*, available at https://indiachapter.in/index.php?/user/article/2/2/20, accessed on 24 February 2024.
9. R.P. Kangle, *The Kautilya Arthashastra-Part II*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2014, p. 512.
10. Roger Boesche, 'Kautilya's "Arthashastra" and the Legalism of Lord Shang'*, Journal of Asian History*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2008, p. 68.
11. Ibid., p. 65.
12. Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (translated and edited), *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1946, pp. 77–128.
13. R.P. Kangle, *The Kautilya Arthashastra-Part II*, n. 8, p. 407.
14. Danny Shoham and Michael Liebig, 'The Intelligence Dimension of Kautilyan Statecraft and Its Implications for the Present', *Journal of Intelligence History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2016.
15. Rory Cox, 'On the (Very) Ancient Origins of Just War and its Lessons for Today', *E-International Relations*, available at https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/02/on-the-very-ancient-origins-of-just-war-and-its-lessons-for-today/#google_vignette, accessed on 28 February 2024. Also, see, Rory Cox, *Origins of the Just War: Military Ethics and Culture in the Ancient Near East*, Princeton University Press, 2023.
16. Torkel Brekke (ed.), *The Ethics of War in Ancient Civilizations: A Comparative Perspective*, Routledge, New York, 2006, pp. 113–19.
17. Harry Eckstein, 'Culturalist Theory of Political Change', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3, 1988, p. 789.