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## **Polity, Administration of State and Kautilya's Doctrines: Rereading “*Arthashastra*”**

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**Abstract:** Is it feasible to carry out the administration of a polity arbitrarily? The art of statecraft is complex and divergent as the nature of polity is never uniform. There has never been a universal formula for state administration. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a full-fledged quintessential masterwork on the science of polity. Debates about how far the doctrines of Kautilya as presented in *Arthashastra* can be pragmatically relevant in accord with the imperatives of modern state administration exist. It appears convenient and fashionable to repudiate *Arthashastra* as an antiquated piece of scholarly work. As the classical political treatise of first order, *Arthashastra* extensively chisels all the vital subjects of polity in superlative forms. Delving into the pages of *Arthashastra* invariably illuminates us with the most penetrating insights which can be employed as groundwork to cope with manifold challenges facing a government. This paper examines Kautilya's teachings on polity and art of statecraft in today's context. It further seeks to explain why *Arthashastra* stays pre-eminent as ever.

**Keywords:** Security, Espionage, Warfare, Taxation, Diplomacy, Social Order.

### **Introduction**

Why Kautilya's *Arthashastra* remains irreplaceable ever? It is absolutely wrong to assume that reading classical political treatises is a fruitless academic exercise. Classical treatises—be it Indian and western—are the astute examination of the ailments of human societies, and therefore the roadmaps for finding panaceas. While the primacy bestowed upon the classical texts in the west has not

diminished, the same cannot be asserted in the Indian context. *Arthashastra* has not been accommodated a due recognition. Authored several centuries ago, *Arthashastra* continues to be a timeless piece on the art of statecraft and political economy. There is no dimension of modern nation state administration which Kautilya has not surveyed in *Arthashastra*. Despite all the paraphernalia and claims of advancement in human society, certain fundamental aspects of state are unchanged. Art of running a government is a multi-layered sophisticated process. Human conduct has not reached the stage where state can be completely dispensed with. It remains a far chimerical dream to structure a society without a polity. Discourses on the essentials of attaining a fulfilled and dignified life continue. Human beings are grappling with some of the most profound political questions for ages. What is a good polity? How should a government conduct itself? How can an orderly society be established? Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is the one towering masterpiece which does address these questions magisterially.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a voluminous text, not easy to translate. Each book and chapter tackle specific subject-domains pertaining to political society. The essence of each book resonates with the present conditions. It cannot absolutely be claimed that *Arthashastra* presents accurate answers to all the living questions in a polity; nor it provides a universal mechanism to alleviate the complexities of state administration. *Arthashastra* nonetheless presents robust frameworks to figure out the practical ways to navigate the pressing issues in society. In India, partly because of the ugly colonial past, *Arthashastra* does not find its deserving appreciation. The ingrained culture of false pride in disdaining anything Indian and nurturing a culture of admiring everything western among the influential section of Indian intellectuals is one vivid reason. Reading of *Arthashastra* appears to be outsourced to a small circle of scholars and career diplomats in India. Indian academicians in general reserve the most conservative attention to the value of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, let alone making it an essential part of academic readings or curriculum. Nor most of the Indian scholars celebrate *Arthashastra* as a world class text. It is the western scholars who evidently demonstrate rigorous enthusiasm exploring *Arthashastra* far ahead of the Indian counterparts these days.

### **Nature of State, Efficient Government and Qualities**

Kautilya presents the genesis of the state in an engrossing fashion. Kingship which represents the state is born out of a contract between people and king. In the beginning, there was a complete anarchy—Matsyanyaya. State is the outcome of a contract carried out between the people and king. An agreement under the contract is that people must regard and obey king. King is under the obligation to provide protection of the people. King is given powers to perform other duties in the interest of the people. King is to ensure security, dharma and welfare of subjects in the state (Kangle 2020: 116b). Kautilya's ideas about the origin of state are not totally in alliance with the western concept of social contract and divine origin of king. Kautilya's account on the emergence of state is also different from the theory of Aristotle for whom state is a natural institution (Aristotle 1992: 55). In political theory, nature of the origin of the state is considered very crucial because it determines the powers and obligations of the rulers and subjects. When Kautilya envisages the idea that state is not a direct creation of the God, it does mean that king is not accorded absolute powers. Under the contract, powers and authorities of the king are limited. The king is supposed to serve the people and people are bound to comply with the rule of king. King derives all the authority from law (Bandyopadhyaya 1927: 67). At the same time, king is not a mere puppet of people. Kautilyan state is a perfect blend of a strong state and a limited state. Using modern political parlance, Kautilyan state is neither a totalitarian state nor a minimal state.

For Kautilya, state must have seven integral elements for the effective administration. There must be a ruler and the ruler must be a native of the state. The ruler must be pious, strong minded, brave, virtuous etc. A group of ministers or councilors must be appointed to assist and advise the ruler in the administration of state. The number of ministers can be fixed based on the requirements. A consultative body of three or four councilors must be there with whom the ruler must consult. Significant body of population must inhabit in the state. Sizeable territory which is fertile and blessed with natural resources must be there. The capital of the state from where the ruler conducts administration must be fortified—a fortified capital. The state must maintain a treasury and wealth must be accumulated. State exchequer must be healthy to meet the demands of

administration and the unseen calamities. A well-equipped army to defend the state must be there. The military forces are for the defence and expansion of the state territory. Allies of the state is necessary for the political and military expediency. Allies are maintained for security, strength and mutual advantages. This amply demonstrates that what Kautilya prescribes in *Arthashastra* about elements of state is far more accurate than modern state system which necessitates mainly four elements.

As envisioned centuries ago by Kautilya, state administration cannot be solely burdened on the shoulders of a leader. A full-fledged functioning of a modern state is based on various components. Delegation of powers is in practice for the smooth administration of the state. Kautilya's seven parts of state are in no account out of fashion today. A modern state would stand hollow without any of the components which Kautilya proposes in *Arthashastra*. The nature of state for Kautilya is essentially monarchical as it used to be predominant in his time. But Kautilya does not agree with the idea that there should be a rule by one person only. Kautilya does suggest the possibility of a 'dyarchy'—rule by brothers or father and son provided it is to the welfare of the people (Rangarajan 1992: 149). Whether should there be federal or unitary form of government is not clearly figured in *Arthashastra*. Kautilya indicates the possible existence of the confederation. Kautilya does not emphatically recommend the need for the state to adopt a system of confederacy. Albeit Kautilya does not indicate any preference for an extra-large size state, he mentions a sense of 'King-Emperor' over a big region feasible to establish social order (Rangarajan 1992: 507, 589).

### **Security of State, Role of Espionage and Imperatives**

Why should security be a high priority concern for state? Kautilya gives utmost primacy to the security of state. King represents the state and people are secured when the king is safe. Security of king is vital for the safeguard of state. Enemies invade a country when king is weak and vulnerable. Military conquest and brutal suppression by rivals occur when king is fragile. A country is protected when the ruler is fully secured. Prevention of lawlessness and disorder can be ensured when the ruler is not insecure. Welfare of people can flourish when there is proper security in state. Without a stable king, state administration is bound to be in

disarray. There are perpetual threats to the life of king. Kautilya succinctly lays down some measures to establish full security arrangement of king. Personal guards of king—both male and female must be maintained. Surveillance throughout the state is to be installed. Vigilance must be employed on the ministers and royal physicians. Ruler must inspect army in military dress (Rangarajan 1992: 129). Ruler must update all information from spies. Ruler must attend public festivals guarded by the personal security. For Kautilya, stability and progress of a state is possible when government is solid. Security of state is paramount, no matter how fair a ruler can be.

Kautilya is very particular about the significance of espionage. Institution of espionage is one of the pillars of statecraft which is tasked to corroborate security and stability of state. In *Arthashastra*, Kautilya suggests that spies must be deployed everywhere—inside and outside of the state. Spies collect secret information and help king in destabilizing enemy state. Spies are instrumental in planning various strategies and schemes of government. Spies are used to test the loyalty and integrity of ministers. Allegiance of ministers and officials towards king are ensured by spies. Spies help king to be alert and awake. Planting of false propaganda and rumour against enemy state can be done through spies. King must deploy double agents and try to catch double agents of his enemies. At the same time, Kautilya cautions king about the information given by spies. Intelligence provided by spies must be triple checked and spies passing on wrong information must be severely punished. For Kautilya, selection of spy is equally important. Anybody cannot be employed as spy as it will be disastrous for security of state. According to *Arthashastra*, well read, courageous, daredevil, cruel and poor persons can be selected as spies. Widows, disguised saints, disguised farmers, intelligent merchants, and disguised ascetic can be used as spies (Rangarajan 1992; 468-472). Espionage is a serious business as indicated by Kautilya for state administration.

It is an unequivocal fact that every sovereign country gives topmost priority to security of its people. Security arrangement of state is a sophisticated mechanism. Very advanced systems of networks and machineries are in operation for the security of state. Sovereign countries around the world commit huge budget for running intelligence agencies. Intelligent agencies serve as the ear and eyes of

modern governments. Espionage is always an embedded part of state administration. Given the nature of the complex behavior of states, power rivalry tends to popup. As matter of fact, factors which are working to imperil the stability of a state are not necessarily always external. Threats to the national security of state can also emerge from within. Intelligent agencies are assigned to sabotage elements which constantly pose as threats to state. History shows that every great and advanced nation sustains powerful institution of espionage. Covert operations orchestrated among countries are almost day to day phenomena. Having a competent intelligence service is deemed as one indispensable apparatus for preserving sovereignty and expansion of power of state. And this is how the eminence of security of state as advocated by Kautilya perpetually reverberates.

### **Foreign Policy of State, Diplomacy and Necessities**

According to Kautilya, ruler must be ambitious enough to subjugate foreign territories as doing so would bring power, prestige and strength in the state. Ruler must be always cautious about the neighbouring country, possibly a potential enemy, and consider country which is on the other side of enemy country as a natural ally. Relations among states can be tricky and perilous. Ruler needs to be adept about the craft of dealing with other states. Kautilya minutely elaborates how a foreign policy should be conducted in *Arthashastra*. Kautilya puts forward a six-fold strategy of foreign policy. They are: (a) Peace Pact: It is about making a peace treaty with a superior power. When ruler knows that its country is weaker in comparison to enemy, a peace pact can be arranged. This would bring peace and stability in his state (Olivelle 2013: 278); (b) Initiating Hostilities: It is taking harmful actions—war, conflict and violence—against enemy country. When ruler realizes that his state is stronger than enemy state, hostilities can be initiated. This would hinder the prosperity of enemy and hurt the activities of enemy (Olivelle 2013: 279); (c) Remaining Stationary: It is for the patient waiting of right time. When ruler knows that neither he nor his enemy is in the position to hurt each other, he must wait patiently for enemy to be weakened (Olivelle 2013: 280); (d) Marching into Battle: It says about going to battle with full strength. When ruler is in possession of abundant strategic advantages, he must march into battle against enemy (Olivelle 2013: 280); (e) Seeking Refuge: It is about seeking protection of a



stronger king. When ruler lacks complete power and unable to prevent enemy, he must seek refuge till he regains independence (Olivelle 2013: 280); (f) Double Stratagem: It is pursuing peace pact and initiating hostilities simultaneously. When king thinks that making peace pact with one country will advance his interest and initiating hostility towards another country will enhance its power, a double stratagem must be pursued (Olivelle 2013: 280). It is an observable reality that countries behave differently and so is the modus operandi of pursuing their interest. Masterplans being sculpted by countries in one or the other resonate the strategies as charted out by Kautilya in *Arthashastra*.

For Kautilya, diplomats or envoys are vital for the expansion of state territory as well as for promotion of state's interest. The main functions of the envoy are gathering information, making treaties, and carrying intrigues for parent state. And Kautilya is of the view that foreign countries can be divided into friends, enemies, mediators and neutrals (Kangle 2010: 318-19a). Kautilya is not an idealist in the true sense as far as his theory of foreign policy is concerned. As a pragmatic thinker, Kautilya appears to mean that the guiding principle of foreign policy is expediency rather than morality. Foreign policy of almost all countries do not deviate much from this principle. Foreign policy is an intricate feature of statecraft for every country. A separate department in every state heads the affairs of foreign policy. A country's long-term well-being is largely shaped by how masterly it conducts its relations with other countries. No country in the modern days can be fully self-sufficient and self-reliant by being secluded. Countries need executing a robust foreign policy to be politically stable and economically prosperous. Every country has its national interest and acts upon it. No country can ever remain friendly to another country as endless conflicts of interest are bound to erupt from time to time. How a country can negotiate with other countries for the mutual benefits and advantages is the core subject matter of foreign policy. Although foreign policy propounded by Kautilya tilts primarily towards political aspect, it also touches upon economic dimension. *Arthashastra* also outlines the desideratum for forging economic relations among states. The contemporary imperatives of foreign policy in this age of economic globalization are in line with Kautilya's precepts.

### **Requisites of Warfare, Strategy and Defence of State**

As a matter of interest, Kautilya is not a pacifist in so far as his ideas in international relations are concerned. He is not a hardcore warmonger either, but a true realist. For the security and aggrandizement of state, Kautilya expounds with unparalleled authority the art of war and strategies for defence. In the interest of state, war against enemy is necessary. War is essentially for the promotion of state's interest through defence and conquest. For Kautilya, warfare is not just confined to the physical war. Four kinds of warfare are specified in *Arthashastra* (Rangarajan 1992: 636). 'Open warfare' is one kind of warfare Kautilya propounds. When exact time and place are right, open war is declared. And when king is in superior position and terrains are favourable, war is openly declared against enemy. 'Psychological warfare' is about instigation of treachery in enemy camp. It is to frighten the people of enemy side and boosting the morale of king's side. 'Clandestine warfare' is a covert method of warfare without actual fighting. Assassination of enemy using agents and allies is an example of this warfare. 'War by counsel' is a kind of diplomatic war by making treaties, agreements and alliances. When king is so weak and unable to engage in direct battle, war by counsel can be invoked.

According to Kautilya, military must be divided into different wings—not less than three or four wings. The entire powers of the army must not be concentrated in one hand which is dangerous. Army wings must be headed by different commanders. Military wings can be divided into infantry, cavalry, elephant force, horse force, chariot force (Olivelle 2013: 47; 349). Army must be paid well not to be bribed by enemies. Army must be kept under strict surveillance to test their loyalty to state. For Kautilya, all the three varnas can serve in army except the Brahmins. Brahmins are not preferred because enemy can trick them by prostrating before them (Olivelle 2013: 354). When war is fixed, those experts in warfare and astrologers must be consulted. Right time and place must be also identified. Kautilya highly recommends that several forts must be constructed for the safeguard of state. Mountain fort, water fort, desert fort, and forest fort must be constructed in different parts of the state. After the war, as Kautilya spells out, the conquered new territory must be treated based on prevailing conditions. Kautilya argues that defeated army and conquered people must be absorbed, not harassed. They must be



pacified by showing good virtues, and respect for their tradition and customs. Any custom which are detrimental to victorious king must be replaced by new alternatives. Secret agents must be deployed and those who can cause trouble must be eliminated (Rangarajan 1992: 699-700).

The only treatise on warfare which can be analogous to Kautilya's theory of warfare is Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Kautilya and Sun Tzu contend that warfare is not limited to direct confrontation—physical war. Sun Tzu famously states about war based on deception and victory without fighting (Tzu 2013: 3, 9). Kautilya too elucidates about clandestine war and psychological war. While Sun Tzu's art of war inclines more towards philosophical aphorisms, Kautilya's theory of warfare is much more extensive. But warfare keeps evolving over the period of time. Today we have conventional war, nuclear war, biological war, chemical war, cold war, cyber war etc. All the powerful countries are always prepared for some kinds of war. War is so inevitable for countries to pursue their vital national interest. One of the reasons why countries around the world increase their stockpile of weapons is because they feel constant threats from enemy countries. This appropriately explains why there is ceaseless proliferation of lethal arms and ammunitions among the countries. Despite all fascinating talks about humanity, peace and universal brotherhood, countries constantly engage in wars. Defence budget of many countries are skyrocketing and there is a race to increase it. Countries consider it totally legitimate to wage war in order to guard sovereignty and national interest. For instance, the United States justifies its never-ending wars in the name of democracy and human rights. But a clinical observer could easily notice that USA is expending so much in wars purely for its own national interest. Human nature has not ascended to a phase where the necessities of war are completely banished. War is to do with human nature and hence one of the peculiar characteristics of state. All what Kautilya invokes about warfare keeps echoing in today's times.

### **Maintenance of State Exchequer and Taxation Policy**

Cementing a good state administration is equally contingent upon the good health of its economy. Kautilya rightly preaches that treasury of state should be maintained properly. Kautilya claims that 'a king with depleted treasury will eat

into the very vitality of both citizens and country people' (Shamasastri 1951: 46). State treasury must be abundant with revenues. Efficient administration of state requires a sound and healthy state exchequer. For sustaining the loyalty of the officials and army, treasury must be abundant. Maintaining a full state exchequer is also a prerequisite to meet several unseen calamities. No policy and welfare programme of the people can be implemented without a flourishing economy. So, it is extremely necessary for state to accumulate its wealth and scale up its resources. State can accelerate wealth and assets through taxes, tributes, revenues, fines, voluntary contributions etc. For Kautilya, one of the major sources of wealth for state is taxation. (Rangarajan 1992: 228-9). State has a right to collect taxes from its people. The idea is that king is the residual owner of all properties in state. Kautilya, however, cautions that state must levy and collect taxes in the rightful ways. State should not resort to unfair and coercive means to tax people. This means that unfair tax regime may breed harmful ramifications for state.

According to Kautilya, it is state which has the power to levy tax on people and collect. No other private organization and individuals possess the power to tax. State's power to tax people is not unlimited. Taxation should not be heavy and the poor people should not feel the burden of tax. Tax must be increased gradually if necessary and no sudden increase of tax must be imposed on people. Tax must not be exclusive and it must be equitable to all. People are allowed to pay tax in the form of coins, gold, agricultural products, livestock etc. Kautilya also makes some exemptions for some people from taxation. Those officiating priest and teachers can be exempted from tax (Olivelle 2013: 99). A region devastated by enemy or natural calamity can be exempted. Further, a monk who renounces everything and live in a monastery, living an isolated life, can be exempted. Likewise, a saint or a holy man who has attained higher enlightenment must not be taxed. There must be a collector general who collects taxes. This collector general takes care of the revenues coming from various sources. This official not only maintains the statement of expenditure and receipt, but it also has to ensure that income of state is augmented. Moreover, a proper budget, account and audit must be maintained. Any discrepancies in accounting and audit must be fixed and the concerned officials should be made accountable.

It is true that all state activities are heavily dependent on state's treasury. At the same time, taxation is one very contentious activity of state in the modern statecraft. There are views for and against taxation by state. Argument by those who oppose taxation policy is that state violates individuals' rights through taxation. Taxation is a coercive instrument vested in the hands of state that can trouble its people. But Kautilya is one gigantic thinker who uncompromisingly advocates the need for taxation—a centralized taxation system. Taxation becomes increasingly sacrosanct for state. In *Arthashastra*, Kautilya minutely elaborates as to how the rate of tax should be levied on numerous items. All what Kautilya enunciates about taxation policy may not be strictly applicable in today's context. Nevertheless, Kautilya's views about the inherent interdependency between state treasury and administration cannot be ruled out. Taxation continues to be one very fundamental activity of modern state. Taxation is universally endorsed as a route to social justice.

### **Instituting Social Order, Justice and Law Under State**

Kautilya stipulates that social order—Varnashrama dharma—has to be preserved in society. Varna system which is divinely created must be in proper order. Varna system is prescribed in the Vedas and state cannot alter it. Accordingly, society is divided into four social classes (Olivelle 2013: 67-8). Aryas are those who fall in the four varnas and non-Aryas are those who are outside the varna strata (Rangarajan 1992: 29). Aryas are cultured and superior to non-Aryas. Aryas should never be made slaves and Aryas captured in war could be released by paying ransom demanded. The four varna groups must stay inside city and the chandals must stay outside city and villages. Breach of caste practices must be severely punished. Confusion created by commixture of different varnas and their respective duties must be prevented. Alongside, law should be enforced strictly by state. For speedy disposal of cases, administration of justice can be decentralized—court for civil cases and court for criminal cases. Kautilya recommends a system of having judges and officials for the delivery of justice (Rangarajan 1992: 349-360). Punishment and reward are given as per the decision of court of law based on the gravity of offence. Interestingly, Kautilya makes no discrimination between brahmins and sudras—no immunity for brahmins in the matters of punishment for

offences (Krishna Rao 1958: 231). Kautilya deals with different kinds of law in the most elaborate style in *Arthashastra*. One of the most comprehensive penal code systems is presented in *Arthashastra*. For Kautilya, justice should reside in state. It is a primary duty of king to establish justice for all. King must exercise the power to punish the offenders of laws established impartially and cautiously. Failure to exercise the power of sanction on the part of king may throw the state into chaos and disruption. Kautilya devotes considerable space in *Arthashastra* detailing the forms of punishments for the outlaws in society.

Kautilya belongs to the school which proclaims that the perpetuation of caste structure is a way to entrench a harmonious social order. Irrespective of the fact that caste system distinguishes itself to be one of the most defining features of Indian social system, the rigidity which defines the caste, in terms of social occupations, has significantly dwindled at present. Intermingling of caste groups is an increasing social phenomenon in India. Acceptance of caste fluidity while sheltering the basic caste boundaries is the reality. Kautilya also espouses correctly that maintenance of law and justice are the primary indicators of a well-ordered-society. In *Arthashastra*, we find the most cultivated body of work on the codification of laws. Kautilya's judicial system may not be considered as the ultimate foundation of modern jurisprudence in India. Numerous forms of punishment as articulated by Kautilya may not be totally in touch with the modern realities. The Indian legal system however can benefit itself enormously from *Arthashastra*. There are lots of practices and customs in various levels of society which need to be codified for better delivery mechanism of justice. The prevailing laws in India which are largely imported from the west suffer from several lacunas. Encompassing ideal canons and edicts from *Arthashastra* can be undoubtedly of great help in indigenizing both civil and criminal laws.

## **Conclusion**

*Arthashastra* is rightfully enduring, so is the name Kautilya. It is asserted that Kautilya had written *Arthashastra* when the Europeans were living in caves (Lintner 2012: 207). It is absolutely incommensurable to elevate Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* to the lofty heights of *Arthashastra* as often done. The very essence of *The Prince* is how a ruler can win and lose political power (Parks

2009: xix). *Arthashastra* remains a timeless masterpiece and the Kautilyan doctrines are continuously reverberating in the overall administration of state. For instance, Kautilya forcefully espouses that king must be virtuous and must govern its subjects rightfully. It is exactly what a government is obliged towards its people. Kautilya exposit about the importance of security as one crucial task of government. Government employs secret service agencies to ensure the security of state. A well-functioning state is also determined by the economic well-being of people. No state can be stable and developed without a muscular economic system. And no country can become truly self-sufficient without fostering a good relationship with other countries. Foreign policy and diplomacy in international relations can be efficaciously administered by applying the axioms from *Arthashastra*. As countries pursue often diametric national interest, they are driven to war. Who can be more veracious than Kautilya when he avers that war is incumbent for state? Likewise, it is a paramount enterprise of state to maintain a just order through strict enforcement of law—hallmark of a good governance. Effective administration of state can be conditioned by how well these pivotal functions are discharged. There is hence an inexorable obligation to reinvestigate Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in our times.

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