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**Article**

## State and Governance in Kautilya's Arthashastra

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### Abstract

Not only in the history of India but also in the world history, the Mauryan Empire has a distinguished place of importance. Kautilya, the great political philosopher was the chief advisor and prime minister, who assisted his king, Chandragupta Maurya to extend the kingdom to whole of India and abroad. Arthashastra (322- 298 B.C) of Kautilya is a brilliant treatise for good governance. This work deals with virtually all aspects of governance in a monarchical state. In the Indian philosophy, the objective of every being is the pursuit of dharma. State, a human artifact, is constituted to get the human race out of the state of nature. State enables the citizens to follow their respective dharma and to enjoy private property rights. King is viewed as a protector of dharma, but not the sole interpreter of it. There is separation between secular and ecclesiastical power. State has many autonomous associations and guilds in its jurisdiction and the ensuing polycentric arrangements checks the rise of absolute power. Arthashastra visualizes a huge bureaucratic structure, a complex tax structure, and an intricate intelligence system. Rajadharma is the central point of Arthashastra. Though there is difference of opinions and deviations in his treatise, responsibility of rule of law always remains there. Kautilya demonstrated the vital issues on governance; polity and progress, allied to the welfare of the people. He ventured a concept to which we can say at present, the democratic monarchy.

प्रजासुखे सुखम् राजः प्रजानाम् च हिते हितम् ।

*prajāśukhe sukham rājñah prajānām ca hite hitam |*

नात्मप्रियम् हितम् राजः प्रजानाम् तु प्रियम् हितम् ॥

*nātma-priyam hitam rājña prajānām tu priyam hitam | (Arthaśāstram, 1.19)*

*Attainment of good governance entails that the objectives of the state are fulfilled and realized. This is possible through properly organized and guided administration. This principle is relevant even today. A government is good, if it is administered well. Kautilya suggests that good governance should avoid extreme decisions and extreme actions. Soft actions (Sama, Dam) and harsh actions (Danda, Bheda) should be taken accordingly. Kautilya opines in a most modern way - 'Sovereignty is practicable only with the cooperation of others and all administrative measures are to be taken after proper deliberations.' The King and ministers were supposed to observe strict discipline. Kautilya recommended a strict code of conduct for himself and his administrators.*

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on desktop research methodology. Since most of the original ancient Indian literature is in Sanskrit, Hindi / English translation is used. To know the culture of any era and place, we need to go through the literature related to that era, analyse the same and correlate with the current requirements. For the purpose of this paper, relevant references from **Arthashastra** by Kautilya and some other references have been used. The ancient Indian literature was browsed and verses related to environment were identified, interpreted in light of the modern day requirements of environment sustainability and required relevance (direct or indirect) was established.

### **Introduction**

Republican form of governments were well established in ancient India. At the time of the invasion of Alexander of Macedonia (4th century B.C.), there existed a large number of independent Ganas (republics) like Agrasrenies in the Indus valley, Kamboj in the west, Panchals in the north etc<sup>1</sup>. Kautilya, the author of Arthashastra, was a product of this era. He played the main role in defeating the forces of Alexander. Kautilya believed that the Alexander's successful conquest of (a part of) India was due to the absence of a strong centralized Indian empire. He was determined not to let history repeat itself. Hence the Mauryan empire, which he was instrumental in founding, was (relatively) centralized and

<sup>1</sup>Sen, 1920:Ch.3; Ghoshal, 1923:2

very different from the then prevailing republican systems. His treatise - Arthashastra, therefore, deals only with the governance in a monarchical state.

Our Vedic philosophy gives emphasis to both the material and the spiritual aspects of the human being. The path of pravriti (enjoyment) and that of nivriti (renunciation) are seen to complement each other<sup>2</sup>. 'Rational sciences' such as Mathematics were well developed in ancient India - the concept of 'shunya' (zero) and the decimal system were invented by the 'buddhijivi' (those who make a living from the use of brain power - intellectuals) of the Vedic civilization.

The rationality ethic is the basis of many ancient dharmic texts. Treatise like the Arthashastra advocate the application of reason to statecraft to such an extent that many Occidental scholars have called Kautilya as the "Machiavelli of India".<sup>3</sup>

### Origin of Arthashastra

According to Kautilya's definition of Arthashastra is "*Artha means the science which explains the means of acquiring and maintaining wealth and Shastra<sup>4</sup> means the ways to protect this wealth and territory hence in total Arthashastra means the science of Polity.*" Arthashastra was written around 325 B.C. and published by Shama Shastri in 1909. It contains 15 parts, 180 divisions, 150 chapters and 6,000 shlokas. Kautilya described a well-organized state; Kingship, the qualities of an ideal ruler; the principles of practical politics; Administration; ethical and moral order of the society; domestic and inter-state policies; Warfare, Criminology, Intelligence & Espionage; etc. Besides politics, the other subjects included in Arthashastra are Economics, Ethics, Sociology, Science of Education, Engineering and others.

Arthashastra is divided into sixteen books dealing with virtually every topic concerned with the running of a state - taxation, law, diplomacy, military strategy, economics, bureaucracy etc. Arthashastra advocates a rational ethic to the conduct of the affairs of the state. The emphasis is on codification of law and uniformity of law throughout the empire.

<sup>2</sup>Ghoshal, 1923:7

<sup>3</sup> M.V. Krishna Rao (1958:15-18) has mentioned in his book *Studies in Kautilyathat Kautilya's contribution is similar to that of Aristotle's than of Machiavelli's. Both Aristotle (in Politics) and Kautilya (in Arthashastra) have outlined their respective conceptions of a 'state'. Interestingly, both the masters belong to the same era and both were teachers of the two clashing titans - Aristotle of Alexander and Kautilya of Chandragupta.*

<sup>4</sup>Shastras – Way of Life for an individual and a state.

The basis of good governance is knowledge and Arthashastra classifies knowledge into four categories<sup>5</sup>.

1. **Anvikshiki** (philosophy). This is considered to be the "lamp of all sciences".
2. **Trayi** (the three Vedas - Sama, Rig and Yajur). These texts establish the four classes (varnas) and the four orders (ashrams).
3. **Varta** (economics, specifically agriculture, cattle breeding, and trade).
4. **Dandaniti** (science of government and politics).

Kautilya compiled his political ideas into the Arthashastra, one of the world's earliest treatises on political thought and social order. It deals with self-sufficient economy based on indigenous ways of production; distribution and trade, and discusses monetary and fiscal policies, welfare, international relations, and war strategies in detail. Arthashastra, depicts in many ways the India of his dreams. Covering various topics on administration, politics and economy, it is a book of law and a treatise on running a country, which is relevant even today. His ideas remain popular to this day in India.

In this paper, Basically I focus on Kautilya's thoughts on state and governance

### **Concept of State**

The institution of state is created to enable the individual to practise his/her dharma<sup>17</sup> and thus move towards the emancipation from the cycle of death-rebirth. The condition of arajata (lawlessness) was viewed with distaste as it militated against the practicing of dharma. There is reference in many ancient Vedic texts to Matsya-Nyaya (Law of the Fish) which prevails in the state of nature.<sup>6</sup> Such a state is characterized by the absence of dharma and mamatava (private property rights). Texts have highlighted five different aspects of dharma. These are a) religion, a category of theology, b) virtue, a category of ethics, c) law, a category of jurisprudence, d) justice, and e) duty. In political texts, especially the Arthashastra, dharma has been interpreted in terms of law, justice and duty. Thus according to the doctrine of dharma, State is a law giving, justice dispensing, and duty enforcing institution.<sup>7</sup>

### **Elements of the State and the Role of the King**

<sup>5</sup>Kautilya: Book 1, Ch. 2,3 & 4; Ghoshal, 1923:128-31

<sup>6</sup>There is a reference to 'matsyany'aya' in many ancient texts including the Mahabharata (6th century B.C.), the Ramanaya (predates Mahabharata), and Manusamhita (predates Ramanaya).

<sup>7</sup>Sarkar, 1922:206

The King was looked upon an embodiment of virtue, a protector of dharma. He too was governed by his dharma as any other citizen was. Thus if any actions of the King went against the prevailing notion of dharma, associations and/or the individual citizens were free to question him. King was not the sole interpreter of dharma. Infact there was no specific institution (like the ecclesiastical courts) vested with the authority of interpreting dharma. Every individual was deemed competent to interpret it. This was an important factor in ensuring the non-religious character of the Vedic state.

Arthasastra conceptualizes the state to have seven elements.<sup>8</sup>That is Saptanga. According to Kautilya - **स्वाम्यमात्य जनपद दुर्ग कोश दण्डमित्राणि प्रकृतयः।**<sup>9</sup>

1. *Swami (Monarch)* - The Swami, the sovereign King Unity, uniformity and solidarity of the state.
2. *Amatya (Officials)* - The Mantrin, the ministers; Stable and systematic administration.
3. *Janapada (Population and Territory)* - The Janapada, the people and the territory; Definite territory, able to protect and support both the king and the subjects;
4. *Durga (Fort)* - The Durga, the fortification; Planned system of security and defence;
5. *Kosa (Treasury)* - The Kosha, the treasury; System of just and proportionate taxation;
6. *Danda – (Bala /Military)* - The Sena or the Danda, the army; Strong and powerful state; and
7. *Mitra - Surhit (Ally)* - The Mitra, the allies. Freedom from alien rule. ‘Ally’ means good friendly countries and foreign relations.

King derived his power from three sources - Prabhushakti (the power of the army and the treasury), Mantashakti (advice of wise men, specifically the Council of Ministers) and Utsahshakti (charisma). Mantashakti was rated as the most potent source followed by the prabhushakti and utsahshakti. Clearly Kautilya believed in the importance of institutions (Council of Ministers) and not of an individual (King) in influencing the destiny of the state.

Next to the King came the MantriParishad (Council of Minister). King was enjoined to discuss each and every matter with the Parishad as it represented the distilled wisdom of the

<sup>8</sup>(saptanga,) (Kautilya: Book 6, Ch. 1; Sarkar, 1922:167-9; Verma, [1954] 74:80; Rao, 1958:82).

<sup>9</sup>Arthasastra, Adhikaran– 6, Ch - 1

society. Parishad had two levels - the Inner cabinet and the Outer cabinet. The Inner cabinet had four members - The Chief Minister, The Chief Priest, the Military Commander and the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince was included to ensure smooth succession and to maintain continuity in case of emergencies. The membership of the Outer cabinet was not fixed in number. Invariably the heads of the prominent guilds were co-opted in this body. This gave a representative character of the Parishad.<sup>10</sup>

Kautilya glorified the State and viewed the office Kingship to be the embodiment of all legal and moral authority associated with the institution of the state<sup>11</sup>. The King was an intrinsic part of the social order and by the nature of his office, a defender of that order. However King was to regard himself as an agent of the people and had to abide by his dharma as laid out in the Sastras. The institution of the Kingship was sacred but not the person who happens to hold it.<sup>12</sup>

### Duties of the king

Kautilya did not subscribe to the theory of 'Divine Origin of the Monarch'. King was not the vicar of the god<sup>13</sup>. " The monarch (King) should seek happiness in the happiness of his citizens, his welfare is in their welfare, his good is not in what pleases him but in what pleases the citizens Monarchy, in his view, was a human institution and therefore manned by a human being. However the king was expected to be more than a mere human being since he was the protector of the dharma of the whole society. He had to observe an exemplary conduct himself. He had no private life and all his actions were subject to public scrutiny<sup>14</sup>.

The King had to follow a his rājya dharma. This included a thorough knowledge of the four branches of knowledge<sup>15</sup>. The King was expected to display Atmavrata (self-control) and for this he had to abandon the 'six enemies - kama (lust), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), mana (vanity), mada (haughtiness), and harsha (overjoy)<sup>16</sup>. Clearly Kautilya expected very high

<sup>10</sup>Rao: 1958:86-7

<sup>11</sup>Rao, 1958:50

<sup>12</sup>Sarkar, 1922:174

<sup>13</sup>*prajāsukhesukhamrājñāhprajānāmcahitehitam |  
nātma-priyamprīyamrājñāhprajānām̐tupriyam̐priyam |*

<sup>14</sup>Rao, 1958:122

<sup>15</sup>Ghoshal, 1923:139

<sup>16</sup>Kautilya: Book 1, Ch. 7; Rao, 1958:56

standards from the rulers. This is in contrast to the realistic model of the citizen on which he based so many of his laws.

The King had a fairly regimented daily routine. His day and night was divided into eight nalikas (one and half hours) each. The King was assigned specific tasks for the specific nalika.<sup>17</sup>

### **Taxation**

Kautilya visualized a 'dharmic social contract' between the King and the citizens. Taxes were levied for maintenance of the social order and for the state run welfare apparatus. In case of aggression by an outside agency, the janapads (districts) could ask for tax remission as the King had failed in his duty to protect the citizens<sup>18</sup>.

Kautilya realized the critical role of the tax system for ensuring the economic well-being of the society. The hallmark of his tax system was 'certainty' - of time, of rate and of the mode of payment<sup>19</sup>. Stability in the tax regime was an important factor in ensuring active trade and commerce in the Mauryanempire. This in turn strengthened the revenue base of the state and enabled it to maintain a huge standing army and the welfare apparatus.

State was overzealous in collection of taxes and tapped virtually every source. Citizens paid a toll-tax. Farmers (household as the unit of assessment) had to pay one sixth of the produce as the land tax. There was a land census at periodic intervals and land records were scrupulously maintained. This data base enabled the assessment of the taxable capacity of the household. Traders had to pay one tenth the value of the merchandize as tax. There was an entry tax to enter the fort, tax on use of roads and waterways, and for getting a passport. Even the hermits living in the forest had to part with one sixth of the grain gleaned by them as they too needed the protection of the King<sup>20</sup>. Service industry was also taxed - actors, dancers, soothsayers, prostitutes, and auctioneers were subjected to taxation. Pilgrims had to

<sup>17</sup>*Schedule during the day : 1st Nalika - attend book of accounts, 2nd - attend to public grievances, 3rd - bathe & dine, 4th - oversee the bureaucracy, 5th - meet ministers, 6th - see the intelligence reports, 7th - inspect horses, elephants & chariots, 8th - military affairs.*

*Schedule during the night : 1st - receive spies, 2nd - bathe & dine, 3rd - harem, 4th & 5th - sleep, 6<sup>th</sup> -plan his day, 7th - administrative matters, 8th - consult the priest, astrologer and the Chief Minister (Kautilya:Book 1, Ch . 19).*

<sup>18</sup>Rao, 1958:213

<sup>19</sup>Rao, 1958:213

<sup>20</sup>Ghoshal, 1923:133- 4

pay a YatraVetna (pilgrimage tax). Citizens had to pay a tax (PranayaKriya) for the acts of benevolence.<sup>21</sup>

### **System of Law**

Kautilya was a product of the age of intrigue. He defeated Alexander of Macedonia and the Nanda king (most powerful Indian empire of that era) on the basis of military prowess and political craft. According to Kautilya, the King has to guard against intrigues from internal and external sources. Internal sources include the inner cabinet, the autonomous associations/ guilds, religious orders and the personality of the king himself (atma-dosa). External sources refers to hostile foreign powers.

The intelligence apparatus was very elaborate and had infiltrated virtually every institution and profession - especially the institutions of mass participation like religion. Spies could be under the following guises - kapatikachhatra (fraudulent discipline), udasthita (recluse), grihapalka (householder), vaidehaka (merchant), tapas (an ascetic practicing austerities), satri (a classmate), tikshna (a firebrand), rasada (a poisoner) and a bhikshuki (a mendicant woman)<sup>22</sup>.

### **Bureaucracy**

Kautilya had organized a huge and intricate network of bureaucracy to manage the Mauryanempire. This also reflected the centralized character of the state. Bureaucracy had thirty divisions each headed by Adhyakshas (Chiefs). Reporting relationships were clearly specified.

Kautilya had visualized the necessity of state provision of public goods which strengthened trade and commerce. The bureaucracy was involved in the provision of three of such goods - the 'quality control machinery', the system of currency, and the system of 'weights and measures'. Quality control was a revolutionary concept for that era. This suggests that Mauryan empire had an active trading sector and the buyers (domestic and exports) were discerning. As a mark of quality, merchandise had to be marked with the Abhigyan Mudra (state stamp) in sindura (vermillion). Counterfeiting was strictly punished.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Rao, 1958:209-210

<sup>22</sup>Kautilya, Book 1, Ch. 11

<sup>23</sup>Rao, 1958:218

Bureaucrats received a fixed pay and were also eligible for state subsidized housing<sup>24</sup>. 35 This is an example of Kautilya's deep understanding of statecraft as even in later centuries (in other empires), officials were expected to compensate themselves by retaining a part of revenue extracted from the people (a kind of ad-valorem compensation). The ad -valorem arrangement provided an incentive for the official to squeeze the tax payer as much as possible (a short term on the part of the bureaucrat) as the bureaucratic tenure was not hereditary. Kautilya, given his experience as a Chief Minister, probably realized the peril of such an (ad valorem) arrangement and created a fixed pay compensation structure for the bureaucracy.<sup>25</sup>

Huge bureaucracy invariably results in a principal-agent problem. Kautilya sought to tackle this issue through three means - elaborately monitored standard operating

### System of Spies

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Monks and the sanghas (association of monks) were actively used for the purpose of gathering intelligence. Kautilya even suggested that to assassinate a rival King, weapons may be kept inside an idol and be used when the King comes for worship. Thus Kautilya

<sup>24</sup>Rao, 1958:220

<sup>25</sup>Bureaucrats and other officials received fixed annual salaries in the following order (1\$=28 panas approximately) : Ministers, Chief Priest, Crown Prince, Mother of the King, Queen, Commander-in-Chief - 48,000 panas, Collector General, Commanders 24,000 panas, Other Princes, Chief Constable 12, 000 panas, Commissioner of the city 12,000 panas, Superintendents of the departments 9,000 panas, Accountants 500 panas etc. (Kautilya:Book 5, Ch . 3; Rao, 1958:221).

<sup>26</sup>Kautilya, Book 1, Ch. 11

did not hesitate to use the institution of religion for the purpose of statecraft. For him, the most important condition for the practice of dharma was not the institution of religion but the institution of the state.

Intelligence operations were greatly aided by the maintenance of a 'national citizen register' and a system of passport and visa. Register was updated by regularly conducted censuses and by the compulsory registration of the births and deaths.<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusion

Kautilya was one who even defeated Alexander the Great. His statecraft was perfect and fool proof. It was based on philosophy as well as practical wisdom. When compared with the contemporary political thinkers elsewhere in the world, Kautilya was way ahead of all of them in almost all aspects of state craft. He was realistic, systematic and practical. He was able to convert idealism into practical realms with a touch of realism. For Kautilya, it was not just philosophy to create an utopian state. For him it was the question of running a great empire. That made him all the more different from contemporary political thinkers or those who were to follow him for centuries. Kautilya was also able to blend the ancient religious traditions also into the art of government while keeping the subtle difference from affecting the secular environment of state craft. On any account, it can be stated that a meaningful appreciation of Kautilya as a political thinker will definitely place him at the zenith of the art and science of political thinking. In spite of the superiority of Kautilya's philosophy and practice, his system of administration did not last for more than two centuries. May be because, the later kings could not practice the system properly. It could be also because of the fact that a system based on the concept of Dharma deteriorated because the later kings were not able to preserve dharma. There could have been quite a number of internal conflicts also like the transformation of varna system into caste system based on exploitation.

Hence, Arthasastra is a very comprehensive treatise on the governance in a monarchical Vedic state. Kautilya had a rational approach to governance and statecraft. He conceptualized the state and the office of the kingship to be human artifacts. Also his model of the human being was very realistic. However he expected super human qualities from a 'human' King. Chandragupta, Bindusar and Ashoka matched this ideal but their successors

<sup>27</sup>Rao, 1958:209

could not. Clearly the system of checks and balances amongst the king, the associations and the citizens worked well as long as the King wanted it to work.

The ideal society of the Arthashastra did last for a couple of centuries. However the successful Muslims invasion in the 8th century indicated a serious (military) deficiency in the 'Hindu' society. The vision of Kautilya was a creation of a strong and prosperous Vedic order so the foreigner invasions (like that of Alexander) could be repulsed. The success of the Muslim invasion suggested that either the governance by the 'Hindu' Kings was not according to the tenets of the Arthashastra or the Arthashastra philosophy itself had become antiquated. Probably both were true. Kings had certainly deviated from the Vedic ideal of a 'dharmic king' - the 'servant' of the people and the protector of the dharmic order. Varna system had degenerated into a caste system. The rational and dharmic order of the Arthashastra had been reduced to only a shadow of its past glory. Muslim invasion probably found an easy target in a moribund order.

I would conclude by his note on statecraft which says, "A wise king trained in politics, will, even if he possesses a small territory, conquer the whole earth with the help of the best fitted elements of his sovereignty and will never be defeated"<sup>28</sup>

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