

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE KAUTILYA'S POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

It is very much noteworthy that though the sole credit for dispelling the disparaging notion, especially among the western scholars, that the ancient Indian Sanskrit Literature was a barren land of serious political theory, goes to Kautilya's Arthashastra, but the whole body of ancient Indian Sanskrit literature contributed a great deal to political theory, statecraft and theory of government and hence to the progression of the Universe in general and to the progression (Abhyudaya) of political Universe in particular. Chanakya himself has acknowledged that his work (Arthashastra) is a presentation of the political wisdom collected from the preceding Indian scriptures. The knowledge that man has acquired today is the result of his long struggle for existence and survival. It is a long story of trials and errors, and accumulated experience. During the long history of the march of mankind, there were several periods of glorious achievements and progress in all walks of life and also periods of dismal failures. A continuous narration of this fascinating story for the last twenty five centuries and more are recorded in Sanskrit literature.

KEYWORDS: Kautilya, State, Politics, Ideology

INTRODUCTION

Many stated Kautilya as the first political realist in the world. His work differed from existing political theory in that it talked about ways of running the administration which were based more on self interest than on morality. Arthashastra recommends espionage and the liberal use of provocative agents on a large scale. Murder and false accusations were to be used by a king's secret agents without giving any thought to morals or ethics. There are chapters which give advice to kings to help them keep in check the premature ambitions of their sons, and likewise chapters intended to help princes to thwart their fathers' domineering authority. Kautilya's goal remained to enable the king to achieve complete power. Perhaps it is because he did not have any ambition to rule himself that he was able to consistently remain focused on this goal, devoid of morality or justification. In his opinion, the king had to be disciplined and hard working, sleeping only four hours a night. A king also had to avoid anger and lust, because a kingdom was at stake. It seems surprising that even as late as 1921, about sixteen years after the discovery of Arthashastra of Kautilya and twelve years after the publication of its first English translation a distinguished western orientalist, A. B. Keith should have remarked: "The subtle and profound spirit of India which finds its fullest expression in the absolute idealism of the Vedanta of Samkara and sceptical nihilism of Nagaarjuna, is alien to conception of man as a political organism, whose true end can be found only in and through membership of social community. Hence India offers nothing that can be regarded as a serious theory of politics in the widest sense of the term."¹ Similarly Max Muller has remarked: "To the Greek, existence is full of life and reality; to the Hindu it is a dream, an illusion."²

But it is a sign of the significant change that has taken place in the situation since then that the recent works on

ancient Indian political thought by western scholars, unlike their predecessors, do not start with assumption that the ancient Indians had no contribution to make to the world's stock of political ideas. The credit for bringing about such a change in western view goes solely to Kautilya's Arthashastra which was discovered in 1905 in Trivendram by Dr. Shamarhastrri. As A. B. Keith himself writes, "the claim, however, that the political literature of India deserves serious attention is new. It owes its origin in a large measure to the fortunate discovery of the Arthashastra ascribed to Chanakya, minister of the great Chandragupta, creator of the first Indian empire in history."³ In the same vein, while commenting on Beni Prasad's Theory of Government in Ancient India Keith again writes: "His (Beni Prasad's) work should serve to dispel the prevalent impression that India in ancient times was pre-eminently a land of transcendental philosophers and had no place for men of practical thought, skilled in statecraft and capable of wise and efficient government."⁴ After the discovery and perusal of Arthashastra no one will now seriously challenge the statement that the ancient Indians had also developed system of political theory and no serious scholar will agree with Bloomfield that "there is no provision in Hindu scheme for interests of the state and development of the race."⁵

Kautilya's Arthashastra is a draft constitution of an ideal state. In fact the book was written as a guide for the first emperor of Maurya dynasty, Chandra Gupta (3rd century B. C.) as Prince was written by Machiavelli for guidance of Medici. Due to his political wisdom and diplomatic skills in empire building, Chanakya is called 'Machiavelli of India'. But late Prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru was of the opinion that the comparison was unfair. He rated Chanakya several times more clever and superior political thinker. Chanakya or Kautilya was not only superior to Machiavelli, but I would venture to say that he was superior to his contemporary Greek political philosopher Plato, at least in some respects. Apart from being a great thinker and writer, unlike Plato, Kautilya was a practising statesman and diplomat in his capacity of the prime minister of the emperor Chandra Gupta. Though Plato wrote in Republic that "there can be no rest from troubles (for states or for all mankind) unless either philosophers become kings in their countries or those who are now called kings and rulers come to be sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom; unless, that is to say, political power and philosophy meet together,"⁶ but in his life Plato could not succeed either in making a king philosopher or making a philosopher king. At this score Chanakya was far more successful as he first taught his realist philosophy to Chandra Gupta right from his childhood and then helped him to become an emperor. Thus, Kautilya was a successful king-maker or he was successful in making a philosopher king. Even after becoming the emperor, Chandra Gupta respected Chanakya as his guru and the sole guiding spirit. And for Chanakya, the emperor Chandra Gupta was a living testimony of his achievements and accomplishments of life.

It is very much noteworthy that though the sole credit for dispelling the disparaging notion, especially among the western scholars, that the ancient Indian Sanskrit Literature was a barren land of serious political theory, goes to Kautilya's Arthashastra, but the whole body of ancient Indian Sanskrit literature contributed a great deal to political theory, statecraft and theory of government and hence to the progression of the Universe in general and to the progression (Abhyudaya) of political Universe in particular. Chanakya himself has acknowledged that his work (Arthashastra) is a presentation of the political wisdom collected from the preceding Indian scriptures. Vide the following couplet from Arthashastra: That is, I bow my head to the Master of the Universe, Almighty and Omnipresent Lord Vishnu. After paying my obeisance I will venture to present the political knowledge collected from many scriptures.

Though the founder of Arthashastra School of policy is Brihaspati, but Kautilya's Arthashastra occupies an unrivalled position among the available texts of this genre as well as in Hindu literature on polity. According to

Arthashastra School, 'Artha' is the dominant matter in this world and politics is also subjected to it. This view is largely similar to materialist philosophy of Marx, according to which economic power precedes the political power. Hence, in modern terminology, Kautilya's Arthashastra can be dubbed as a book on political economy. In other words, Kautilya's Arthashastra is, in essence, a book on science of government (Dandaniti) whose base is economic (Artha). In Kautilyan sense Artha implies vocation (Vritti) of man. The earth, on which humans inhabit and depend for their livelihood, is also called Artha. Thus Arthashastra is science of "acquisition and maintenance of (inhabited) earth."⁸ Explaining the objects of Arthashastra Kautilya has said, "This science brings into beings and preserves spiritual good, material well-being and pleasures and destroys spiritual evil, material loss and hatred."⁹

In Vedic literature, in Mahabharata and in Manu political thought occurs as an incident in the general discussion of human life and duties. But about Kautilya's time (4th century B. C.) government theories acquired an independent status and formed the subject of distinct works. It never lost touch with other branches of philosophy but it was recognized as a thing by itself and treated by itself in Arthashastra or treatise on welfare and profit. Professor Beni Prasad suggests that from internal evidence it is clear that Kautilya was familiar with extensive Dharmashastra literature. What the Arthashastra School did was very largely to secularise politics. It is significant that Kautilya simply does not think of dealing with the entire field of knowledge. He thinks that politics must be treated as an independent science. Only it needs to be fitted into general scheme of knowledge. Altogether, we are told, there are four sciences. First Anviksiki or philosophy including the materialistic Lokayata system which sharpens the intellect opens the heart and opens the gate to all knowledge and virtue. Secondly, the Trayi or the triple Vedas, Rig, Sam and Yjur. To these might be added the Atharvaveda and historical lore. Thirdly, Varta or economics was concerned with agriculture, cattle-breeding and trade. Lastly Dandaniti or politics was the science of government, of the enforcement of law and order¹¹. It treated of the means of fresh acquisitions, of the preservation and increase of acquisitions and of bestowing the surplus on the deserving. Some had sought to relegate politics to a secondary position. But Kautilya proclaimed that politics was the supreme science and supreme art. It lay at the root of all. The welfare of all sciences depended on the well-being of politics¹². But Kautilya does not think that the science of government is the only science. Perhaps he realized that this would only mean the designation of a conglomeration of sciences by the name of politics¹³. The science of politics is clearly demarcated from all other branches of social science, but it is recognized that it stands in certain relations with them. From religion and ethics it derives the fundamental dogma that the happiness of the people in this world and in the next is to be promoted. From the same source it derives certain principles of social organization, the division of people into four castes, of individual into four stages. It tries to fit itself into this framework of life. From religion and ethics, politics borrows something, an ideal, a scheme of organization. With economics it entwines itself completely and inextricably. In fact, the two sciences – varta or economics, and Dandaniti or science of government- merge together, and appear as Arthashastra or the science of worldly prosperity – well being. Vide the following couplet of Arthashastra: That is, for the benefit of common people I will state the political knowledge which makes one wise in all respects.

On the deeper problems of political theory Kautilya has little that is original. He merely adopts the conclusions and dogmas of his predecessors. It is always in systemization and clarification that his chief contribution consists. In the course of an apparently incidental dialogue, we are told that the state originated when people got weary of the Logic of the Fish (matsya-nyaya). They selected Manu to be King. It was settled that the king should receive one-sixth of the grain and one-tenth of the merchandise and of gold as his due. It was this revenue which made it possible for the king to ensure the

security and prosperity of his subjects. It must be remembered that the king was bound to protect and promote their welfare¹⁵. Kautilya freely concedes the possibility of republican polity. He even admits that a corporation of clans is invincible in its nature, and enjoys permanent existence¹⁶. But it appears that when he composed his magnum opus, the republics were things of the past. The monarchical principle reigned supreme. Kautilya's whole outlook, tone and trend of thought are monarchical¹⁷.

Arthashastra, instructs that the state must maintain order. Discipline lay at the root of all success. Disorder and offences must be repressed. But undue severity means oppression and defeats its own purpose. On the other hand, undue leniency means weakness. The one provoked dissatisfaction; the other invited contempt. Both the extremes must be avoided. Moderation is the safest rule of state conduct. Exactly like Plato Kautilya maintains that justice is the bedrock of society. Early in his work, Kautilya emphasized the need of justice, particularly in one direction. Taxation must be just and equitable. These were what a modern student would call the constitutional functions of the state. But they formed only the fringe of Hindu state-activity. Kautilya has a section on Removal of Thorns (Kantakashodhan). The expression reminds one of Kant's Hindrance of Hindrances. But Kautilya's whole conception of the duties of the state is much more positive. The state should strive to dispel the misfortunes which afflict the people. It must grapple with floods and famines, rats and locusts, tigers and serpents. It must see that the population was evenly distributed; that precautions were taken against fire; that capitalistic selfishness did not raise the price of commodities. More, the state must regulate and try to improve every aspect of social life. Thus Kautilya presents the theory of a welfare state in Arthashastra.

CONCLUSIONS

Arthashastra, written in the 4th century before Christ, is a work whose relevance has not faded even after 24 centuries have gone by and it deserves a continuing importance as its writer Acharya Chanakya or Kautilya was not only a statesman of one of a kind in the east especially in India but also was one of the best diplomat ever born. Due to this reason, his magnum-opus has good traits of leadership elements which are also the evidence of the intellectual capital India possessed in its glorious past. Arthashastra, instructs that the state must maintain order. Discipline lay at the root of all success. Disorder and offences must be repressed. But undue severity means oppression and defeats its own purpose. On the other hand, undue leniency means weakness. The one provoked dissatisfaction; the other invited contempt. Both the extremes must be avoided. Moderation is the safest rule of state conduct¹⁸. Exactly like Plato Kautilya maintains that justice is the bedrock of society. Early in his work, Kautilya emphasized the need of justice, particularly in one direction. Taxation must be just and equitable¹⁹. These were what a modern student would call the constitutional functions of the state. But they formed only the fringe of Hindu state-activity.

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