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Kautilya's Arthshastra and the Idea of the Welfare State

Neelam Jain

Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University Haryana, India

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ABSTRACT

The article delves into the great work of Arthashastra written by Kautilya to understand his legacy in the current socio-political thought. 'Artha' is regarded as one of the four *purusharthas* (overarching goal of life) and Arthashastra as the Science of Politics or Art of Government. Kautilya's Arthashastra is a comprehensive text consisting of important suggestions for the ruler for internal administration as well as external relations of the state. *Raksha* (protection of the state from external aggression), *palana* (maintenance of law and order within the state) and *yogashema* (safeguarding the welfare of the people) are threefold duties of rulers. Kautilya has connected the idea of the prosperity of the state and its inhabitants with the ability of rulers to maintain proper inter-state relations. His ideas on foreign policy and war techniques along with elaborate discussion of every aspect of internal administration are important contributions to posterity.

Keywords: Arthshastra, Kautilya, Welfare, Dharma, State

INTRODUCTION

'Dharma' and 'Danda' are the two cardinal concepts of Hindu political tradition in India. Maintenance of Dharma is regarded as the most important aspect of Hindu philosophy, for which the coercive or punitive power of the government or ruler is necessary. Dharmashastras explore the various aspects of the Dharma (duties/ principles) of individuals and social groups including the government. In this Dharmashastra tradition, Rajdharma or duties of the ruler are important from the perspective of overall maintenance of the Dharma of other subjects. In contrast to the Dharmashastra writers, the authors of Arthashastras were interested in the organization and mechanisms of danda, that is the way, the government, the agent of danda, could be most efficiently organized. They concentrated on the nature and organization of government, the nature and mechanics of power, the way power is acquired, weakened, and lost, the source of threats to government, and the best way to deal with them. Since the Arthashastra writers

concentrated on the government, they appreciated the autonomy of political life and its distinctive problems to a much greater degree than that of the authors of Dharmashastras. That is why Arthashastra is regarded as the 'science of politics' or 'art of government in its widest sense'.

Kautilya's Arthashastra

Kautilya is not the originator of the Arthashastra tradition. Based on the quotations and references in the later work, it is argued by scholars that there were at least four distinctive schools and thirteen individual teachers of Arthashastra before Kautilya. However, Kautilya's Arthashastra is the only surviving text as all other texts were lost.

Kautilya, also known by the name of Chanakya or Vishnugupta, destroyed the Nanda dynasty and installed Chandragupta Maurya on the throne of Magadha.

Arthashastra contains 15 *Adhikaranas* or books. The first chapter in the first book mentions that the text has 150 chapters, 180 *prakaranas* and 6000 verses in all (1.1.18). *Prakarana* is a section devoted to one topic. Largely, the first 5 books deal with internal administration, and the last 8 deal with the state's relationship with its neighbors. Book 6 deals with the theory of the constituent element of the state and the theory of foreign policy. Book 7 discusses the six methods of foreign policy dealing with various situations in international politics.

The Arthashastra is essentially a treatise on the art of government and is meant to be useful at all times whenever dharma is held to be pre-eminent.

Kautilya describes the organization of the apparatus of the state and prescribes the duties and responsibilities of every key official. There are, naturally, parts devoted to budgetary control, enforcement of civil service discipline, and the public's civic responsibility.

As a textbook intended for state practitioners, Kautilya advised that every situation ought to be analyzed thoroughly before an action plan is formulated, good counsel and good judgment are more important than power and might. Hence, Kautilya not only laid down a rule but modified it every time to suit the actions to the prevailing conditions.

Arthashastra and the Idea of Welfare (Yogakshema)

Kautilya paid great emphasis on the welfare of the people. Welfare in the Arthashastra is not just an abstract concept; it covers the maintenance of social order, increasing economic activity, protection of livelihood, protection of weaker sections of the population, prevention of harassment of the subjects, consumer protection, and even welfare of slaves and prisoners. King is synonymous with the Kautilyan state, whose role is summarized as follows:

“In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness, in their welfare his welfare.” (1.19.34)

A King should be well-trained and practice self-control. Kautilya’s ideal King has the highest qualities of leadership, intellect, energy, and personal attributes and behaves like a sage monarch, a Rajrishi. Among other things, a Rajrishi is ever active in promoting the Yogakshema of the people and endears himself to his people by enriching them and doing good to them.

The word Yogashema is a compound made up of yoga, the successful accomplishment of an objective, and Kshema, its peaceful enjoyment. Thus, peaceful enjoyment of prosperity, i.e. the welfare of the people, is given as much importance as knowledge, self-control, and observance of dharma.

The King’s dharma is to be just, impartial, and lenient in protecting his people (8.2.12, 3.10.46, 1.19.33, 34, 3.1.41, 3.20.24). The King’s attitude to his people should be like that of the father towards his children, particularly when any danger threatens the population.

Components of Welfare State

1. Protection of life and livelihood of people

Protection of livelihood was considered very important and extended to protecting the major areas of economic activity as follows

- Agriculture was protected from being oppressed by different types of taxes, fines, and demands for labour.
- Herds of cattle from thieves, poisons or diseases.
- The principle of fair trading was designed to promote the welfare of the people. Both locally produced and imported goods were to be sold for the benefit of the public.
- Trade routes from harassment by courtiers, state officials, thieves, and frontier officers (2.1.37, 38).
- The Chief Controller of Shipping was responsible for the welfare of sea traders and seamen, the elimination of piracy, ensuring the seaworthiness of vessels, and rescuing vessels in distress.

2. Welfare of the Weaker Sections

Kautilya’s Arthashastra elaborately discussed the protection of weaker sections; particularly the minors, the aged, the sick, the handicapped, women and the helpless persons.

- Some aspects of the welfare of women are for example spinning work to be given to handicapped women (2.23.2, 11), protection of women slaves from exploitation (3.13.20, 23,24), and protection of prostitutes against exploitation and physical injury (2.27.13-18, 23).

- Protection of children is emphasized, especially in the context of slavery and bonded labour (3.13.1, 2, 4). A slave less than eight years old was not to be compelled, against his wishes, to do menial jobs or work in a foreign country (3.13.20).
- Kautilya's concern for the weaker section also extended to conquered people. The following were not to be harmed: the non-combatants, the frightened and those who surrender, fall down or turn their backs (13.4.52).

3. Social Security

Kautilya considered social security as both a private and state matter. The primary responsibility for maintaining the family, children, parents, minor brothers, and unmarried or widowed sisters- lay with the head of the family; no one could become an ascetic without first providing for his wife and children.

However, the state had the obligation to provide a safety net and maintain children, the aged, childless women and the helpless (2.1.26). Arthashastra prescribes that when the state had to maintain the young with no family of their own, such young persons could be recruited into the secret service.

4. Maintenance of Order

The responsibility of maintaining social order was partly individual, to the extent that each person had to follow the dharma of his varna and ashrama, and partly that of the state. The laws relating to the maintenance of order, in the sense of punishing unsocial behavior, have been grouped under criminal investigation, robbery and theft, physical and verbal injury, and sexual offenses. Danda, the coercive power of the state, was exercised through an extensive set of fines and punishments including amputation and the death sentence.

Order was maintained by controlling movement and activities like drinking and gambling. It is also interesting to note that the state was held responsible for any failure to protect the public.

“If a thief was not apprehended and the stolen property was not recovered, the victim was reimbursed from the king's resources. If anyone's property was unjustly appropriated and not restored, he was paid its value” (3.16.25-27).

5. Protection of People against Harassment

Arthashastra elaborately discussed various types of harassment that can be inflicted on people by those who wield positions of power and authority. Chapter 4.4 detects the activities of thirteen types of persons who amassed black money by illicit means: village officials, heads of departments, judges, magistrates, perjurers, instigators of perjury, extortioners, practitioners of

occult, black magic or sorcery, prisoners, dealers of narcotics, counterfeiters and adulterators of precious metals. Kautilya also suggested that for protection of people during natural calamities, the state should preserve grains and other products as reserve stocks and build forts as places of refuge (2.15.22, 23).

6. Welfare of Prisoners

Arthashastra suggests the following measures for the welfare for the prisoners

- Separate prisons for men and women
- Keeping the prisoners free from fire hazards and poisonous insects
- Providing halls, water wells, bathrooms
- Putting restrictions on wardens from harassing or torturing prisoners.
- Prescribing severe punishments for rape of women prisoners and releasing prisoners periodically as well as by general and special amnesties.

7. Welfare of Animals

Kautilya's Arthashastra emphasized on the welfare of animals too. Regulations for the protection of wildlife, a long list of punishments for cruelty to animals, rations for animals, regulations on grazing and the responsibility of veterinary doctors were discussed for protecting the animals.

- It instructs for establishment of animal sanctuaries as a part of the creation of the infrastructure of a prosperous Kingdom.
- Arthashastra has given a list of protected animals. Killing or injuring protected species and animals in reserved parks and sanctuaries was prohibited.
- Village headmen was responsible for preventing cruelty to animals.
- If protected animals or those from reserved forests strayed and were found grazing where they should not, they were to be driven away without hurting them.
- Stray cattle were to be driven off with a rope without harming them.
- Any means could be used to restrain a person found to be treating an animal cruelly (3.10.30-34).
- It prescribes a detailed set of punishments for theft of animals, injuring or killing them.

8. Kautilya's Concern for Fairness in Inter-State Relations or War

Kautilya prohibits indiscriminate attack to all those who stand in the conqueror's way. It says

“The King who attacks a righteous ruler will be hated by his own people and others. Conversely, one who attacks an unrighteous ruler will be liked by all.” (7.3.12).

Kautilya also makes distinctions between attacking a Just King and an unjust King as follows:

“When there was a choice between attacking a strong but unjust King and a weak and just one, Kautilya advises that the unjust King should be attacked even though he would be a stronger adversary; for the subject of the just King will not only come to his help...but follow him till death.” (7.5.16-18).

Kautilya also suggests fair treatment to the people of conquered territory.

“the conqueror shall follow policies which are pleasing and beneficial to the constituents by acting according to Dharma and by granting favours and tax exemptions, giving gifts and bestowing honours...He shall adopt the way of life, dress, language and customs of the people and show the same devotion to the gods of territory and participate in the people’s festivals and amusements.”

CONCLUSION

The aforementioned discussion makes it crystal clear that many of the aspects of the welfare state of contemporary times were already identified by Kautilya’s Arthashastra. The comprehensive discussion on the welfare of different sections of society amplifies Kautilya’s quest for a state which not only protects the territory from external aggression but a state which also promotes the common welfare. Kautilya’s genius lies in integrating the idea of maintaining order and territory as inherent elements of the welfare of the people. The emphasis on protecting the weaker sections and conquered people points to the humanitarian role of the King as visualized by Kautilya. Kautilya’s comprehensive idea of the welfare state can provide a valuable contribution to modern democratic practices.

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