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# **KAUTILYA: POLITICS, ETHICS AND STATECRAFT**

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***KAUTILYA***

**POLITICS, ETHICS AND STATECRAFT**

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## **BACKGROUND: KAUTILYA AND THE MAURYAN EMPIRE**

Kautilya was the minister in the Kingdom of Chandragupta Maurya during 317 – 293 B.C. He has been considered as one of the shrewdest ministers of the times and has explained his views on State, War, Social Structures, Diplomacy, Ethics, Politics and Statecraft very clearly in his book called *Arthashastra*<sup>1</sup>. The Mauryan Empire was larger than the later British India which expanded from the Indian Ocean to Himalayas and upto to Iran in the West. After Alexander left India, this was the most powerful kingdom in India and Kautilya was minister who advised the King.

Before Kautilya there were other philosophers in India who composed the Shastras<sup>2</sup> but his work was robust and encompassed all the treaties written earlier. I considered Kautilya for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to highlight the patterns of thinking in the east which was present long before Machiavelli wrote his “*Prince*”. Secondly Kautilya’s ideologies on state, statecraft and ethics are very realistic and vastly applicable in today’s context. Thirdly, I feel Kautilya’s work on diplomacy is greatly underrepresented in the western world and it is quite apt to analyze his work in that area.

If we compare statesman on the four dimension framework of: War & Peace, Human Rights, International Economic Justice and World Order Kautilya had a strong opinion on all the four aspects. In fact people like Bismark and Woodrow Wilson in recent history had been able to demonstrate their views only on two of the four dimensions. Kautilya’s

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<sup>1</sup> Kautilya’s definition of *Arthashastra* is as follows: *Artha* means the science which explains the means of acquiring and maintaining wealth and *Shastra* means the ways to protect this wealth and territory hence in total *Arthashastra* means the science of Polity.

<sup>2</sup> Shastras – Way of Life for an individual and a state

work is primarily a book of political realism where State is paramount and King shall carry out duties as advised in his book to preserve his state. Kautilya's work is so deep rooted in realism that he goes to describe the gory and brutal means a King must adopt to be in power. This could have been one reason why *Ashoka*, the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya whom Kautilya advised renounced violence and war thus taking the path of *Dharma* or Morals.

In this paper, I shall primarily focus on Kautilya's thoughts on war, diplomacy and ethics. I have devoted a section to compare Kautilya with great philosophers like Plato and later ponder over why Machiavelli's work looks so abridged and succinct in comparison to Kautilya's work. Kautilya's work is then seen in the light of today's politics and ethics. As Max Weber put it aptly in his lecture, "Politics as a Vocation", he said Machiavelli's work was harmless when compared to Kautilya's Arthashastra.

## **KAUTILYA ON WAR**

Kautilya was a proponent of a welfare state but definitely encouraged war for preserving the power of the state. He thought that the possession of power and happiness in a state makes a king superior hence a king should always strive to augment his power. This actually coincides with the Weber's view that there is no moral in international politics which means that states must be at war all the times. Kautilya though did not state this explicitly but we can infer that he did presume to be at war is natural for a state. On the other hand he like Thomas Hobbes believed the goal of science was power. He said that, "*Power is strength and strength changes the minds*"<sup>3</sup>, hence he used power as a tool to control his society as well as his enemies. He also believed that it is the King's duty to seek material gain, spiritual good and pleasures. In this he clearly comes out as a realist and does believe in ethics of responsibility<sup>4</sup>. Kautilya thinks that for a King to attain these three goals must create wealth, have armies and should conquer the kingdoms and enlarge the size of his state. This is quite interesting because he in a way does believe that a state's superiority is in its military and economic might which is what later philosophers and rulers have followed.

In the case of war, Kautilya and Machiavelli have the same reasoning where they advocate the King to be closely involved in the science of war. Kautilya advocated three types of war: Open war, Concealed war and the Silent War<sup>5</sup>. Open war he describes as the war fought between states, concealed war as one which is similar to guerilla war and Silent war which is fought on a continued basis inside the kingdom so that the power of

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<sup>3</sup> Page 15, Roger Boesche, "*Kautilya's Arthashastra on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India*"

<sup>4</sup> *Ethics of Responsibility was a type advocated by Max Weber in his lecture, "Politics as an avocation"*

<sup>5</sup> Page 22, Roger Boesche, "*Kautilya's Arthashastra on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India*"

the King does not get diluted. In his opinion open warfare in any form was righteous. In open warfare he believed that State is one up on over morals and no morals can stop the State from fighting an open war. He believed that there were three types of kings who go into warfare and it is important to understand the distinction between the types of kings and the appropriate warfare strategy to be selected. Firstly, he thought there was a righteous conqueror who can believe in power of the state. This is where the open warfare needs to be fought and the righteous king treats the lost king with dignity. Secondly there is a greedy king who fights war for material wealth in which case along with power state's resources are lost and hence to prevent such a war, one should use a tactical and concealed war. Thirdly he thought there were always demoniacal kings who wanted to plunder and here one must use silent wars.

Kautilya was also very harsh in narrating the exact methods of fighting a silent war and use of spies and women as tools to reduce the strength of a state. Machiavelli, in his work does not labor into the details and one reason could be that the time when Machiavelli wrote, *The Prince*, the world had changed and already quite immoral in many ways. The aspect which I dislike in Kautilya's work is where he advocates the use of women as weapons of war. He saw women as a source of pleasure and charm which should be used to instill clashes between kings. One reason why he wrote in detail explaining the strategy was because he was a strong proponent of social structure. He strongly believed in the caste system and the relative position of a man and a woman in a caste. This could be another reason why during his time there were many *Kshatriyas*<sup>6</sup>. Using secret agents, assassins, lies were tactics which he advocated to win a war. He vehemently defends the

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<sup>6</sup> *Kshatriyas is a caste in the Indian system who were the warriors*

state and believes that religion and morals are supposed to serve the state. In Kautilya's concept of war, chivalry does not have any place and he is a realist. When compared to two early Indian writers *Bharadwaja*<sup>7</sup> and *Vishalaksha*<sup>8</sup>, the former is a realist and the latter is an idealist. Kautilya, takes the side of *Bharadwaja* in his *Arthashastra* and believes that war is a means to an end for wealth and stability. It is very difficult to say what inspired his thinking on the concept of war as we know that he was born as a poor *Brahmin*<sup>9</sup> and strongly believed in social structures.

Kautilya also took the societal structure and King's power as given and never challenged it. His focus was not on war per se but on the strategy and tactics of war which elaborates in his work. In describing his opinion on war, I think he has been very right in saying that a state which seeks power is in war all the time if we use his classification of war<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Bharadwaja was a realist and believed that if a weak king cannot fight, he must use diplomacy*

<sup>8</sup> *Visalaksha was an idealist and believed that it is a King's moral duty to protect the Kingdom and should fight even it means killing himself and losing his citizens*

<sup>9</sup> *Brahmin – A Caste in India which is considered to take the profession of a priest*

<sup>10</sup> *Any state is at war if we think of an open, concealed and silent war*



## **Kautilya on Justice**

Kautilya believed that for the prosperity of a state, the state must be devoid of internal conflict and the King should be in control of the state. To maintain this internal peace he believed in a just and realistic rule of law. His definition of a state was one which had power and wealth and hence he put property rights and protection of wealth as one of the important themes in his jurisprudence. In fact he advocated that one could get rid of corporeal punishment by paying off fines.

Kautilya also attaches great importance to human rights on how the invaded ruler and his ministers should be treated. He shows a deep understanding of criminal justice and war justice. Surprisingly, for a harsh and realist man like Kautilya he shows mercy towards the people defeated in a war and recommends humanity and justice towards them. He thinks that this important to preserve the mandala structure of war and peace. He advocates that defeated king shall be treated with respect and he should be made an ally. He thinks that they key people advising the defeated king should be eliminated through a silent war.

Kautilya believes that law should be in the hands of the King and punishments need to be awarded to those who are guilty so that King can protect himself from the social unrest and unhappiness. He believes that punishment is a means to an end and it needs to prevent the commission of the crime. Kautilya also was a reformer where he thought punishments could reform a person and hence a society. His devotion to social structure

was so strong that he thinks that Brahmins<sup>11</sup> need to be punished less by only exiling him and not torture him. This unequal social justice was in itself injustice but so was his belief. He attaches great importance to *dandaniti*<sup>12</sup> which includes, protecting property, acquiring property, augmenting them and distributing them. He thinks that justice is an important constituent of sovereignty and it needs to be preserved by the State and the ultimate responsibility lies with the King.

Kautilya's view on crime and justice is very elaborate and goes on to differentiate between various crimes. He advocates different punishments depending if they were crimes committed while in public office, civil crimes, sexual crimes, religious crimes etc. This shows that he had great grasp to customize the rule of law depending both on the offence and the structure of the society. He believed that the structure and peace is preserved in a society by effective jurisprudence. In today's context some of his ideas might be irrelevant but it shows that the ancient Hindu jurisprudence was codified and actually more resembled the common law.

Kautilya's understanding of justice, war, diplomacy and human rights makes him unique in his times. In ancient India there is no one comparable who could have stood the test for justice being a tool for statescraft. Kautilya believed that while it is as much important for the state to wage a war and conquer, it is also important to maintain law and order within the state in order to make it more powerful.

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<sup>11</sup> *It is also deplorable to see that he advocates strict punishments for men who commit adultery with women of higher caste but if the woman was of a lower caste then punishments are more lenient.*

<sup>12</sup> *Justice by Stick*

## **KAUTILYA ON DIPLOMACY**

Kautilya believed that nations acted in their political, economic and military self-interest. He thought that foreign policy or diplomacy will be practiced as long as the self-interest of the state is served because every state acts in a way to maximize the power and self interest. He thought that the world was in such a state that a kingdom was either at war or was preparing for a war and diplomacy was yet another weapon used in this constant warfare. He believed that diplomacy is a series of actions taken by a kingdom such that it gains strength and eventually conquers the nation with which diplomatic ties were created. He also believed that treaties should be made in such a way that King benefits and serves the self-interest of the Kingdom. He did talk about violating treaties and creating dissension between states so that his kingdom might benefit which directly is similar to Bismarck's strategies of treaties. In fact Kautilya can be compared to Bismarck that both of them thought of extremely complex network of treaties and relationships without any successor in either case.

Kautilya described three types of political system namely rule making, rule application and rule adjudication and has been recognized for his contributions to bringing diplomacy at the helm of state's affairs. In his words he defines diplomacy as, "*A King who understands the true implication of diplomacy conquers the whole world*"<sup>13</sup>. To understand his concept of diplomacy it is important to understand the Mandala concept, six types of foreign policy and four solutions. I shall explain the Mandala concept which is quite apt in today's context.

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<sup>13</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, "Kautilya's Concept of Diplomacy"

## **The Mandala Concept**

The *Mandala* concept is one in which there are circles of friends and foes with the central point being the King and his State. This embraces twelve kings in the vicinity and he considers the kingdoms as neighbors, the states which are the enemies neighbors are his enemies' friends and the next circle of states are his friends. He also believes that the states which are his neighbors and are also neighbors of his enemies are neutral and should always be treated with respect. He believes that this circle is dynamic and the King should strive to be expanding his central position and reduce the power of the other kings in the vicinity. He also proposes to build alliances with states which are two degrees away from the center to create a balance of power. Though Bismarck did not exactly operate with the *Mandala* concept in Mind, I do see that he strived to create alliances and ties to enhance his strength and expanding the power of German-Prussia.

The Mandala concept is more multipolar than the current structure we see. Though our world has emerged into multipolar on the economic front, it is still unipolar on the military front. Also the intermediate powers in today's world play a major, thanks to De Gaulle but in the Kautilyan world he did recognize the importance of middle powers. In addition he mentions that war is an outcome of a power struggle and state sovereignty hence he treats diplomacy as a temporary phenomenon. That being said he elaborates on the six forms of diplomacy which I find very interesting and shall quote examples where they can be used.

## Six forms of Diplomacy<sup>14</sup>

Kautilya elaborates on strategies for not only the strong king and the aggressor but also explains the strategies a weak king should follow to defend himself and protect the state. His forms of diplomacy also depends on the type of the king whether the policy is directed toward the superior, inferior or equal<sup>15</sup>. The six types of foreign policy that he advocates are

1. *Sandhi*<sup>16</sup>: This means accommodation, which means that kings seek to accommodate the each other and does not resolve to hostile means. These *Sandhis* could be temporary or permanent and it depends on the environment and relative powers of the kings. The various sub-forms in this *sandhi* have been practiced by statesmen later. Bismarck had used *Karmasandhi* with Austria and now Britain's foreign policy has been to maintain *Anavasitasandhi* with the United States.
2. *Vigraha*: This means hostility shown to neighbor or a state. Kautilya strongly believed that the states are always at war and seek power hence it is necessary to have hostile foreign policy towards few states which are either equal in power or subordinate in power.
3. *Asana*: This means indifference and he chooses this policy for states which are neutral in his mandala concept of nations. He also believes that an indifferent foreign policy works well in the case of equal power. I may not agree on this point as we have seen in case of equal powers in history, there has been always tension which either led to a war or an alliance. Germany viewed Britain as an

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<sup>14</sup> The six forms are explained in detail in Pushpendra Kumar, "Kautilya Arthasastra: An Appraisal"

<sup>15</sup> He defines superiority or inferiority primarily on three dimensions: Military Power, Economic Power and Geographical Size

<sup>16</sup> *Sandhi* in his view could be of five types: *Mitrasandhi*: With an ally on definite terms, *Hiranyasandhi*: Agreement based on transfer of wealth, *Bhoomisandhi*: Agreement based on transfer of land or territory, *Karmasandhi*: Agreement for exchange of military and *Anavasitasandhi*: Agreement to help colonize an unoccupied place

- equal power and could not be indifferent neither could US be indifferent to Russia during the cold war.
4. Dvaidhibhava: This means double policy which was very well practiced by Bismarck. Kautilya advocates this foreign policy for states which are superior militarily. Kissinger followed this strategy where he made alliance with China such that at no time Russia and China could become closer in ties than US and China. Kautilya advocated the same concept within his Mandala framework.
  5. Samsarya: This policy of protection is followed where a stronger state intervenes and shelters a weak state. Kautilya advocates this policy when a stronger state needs a shield to protect itself from an equal power it is good to use this policy of protection for a third state and use this alliance to defend against the potential enemy. In one sense the colonization was followed where European powers started controlling weak nations in Africa and Asia and thus strengthening their position against one another.
  6. Yana: This policy is to attack. Kautilya does mention that peace and stability in a state makes the state even powerful but never shies away from attacking the weak and unjust king. He thinks that an unjust king keeps the society unhappy which makes that state a potential target as it is weak due to social unrest. Who knows may George W. Bush read Kautilya before pursuing the Yana policy on Iraq!

Thus Kautilya's foreign policy was formed by his strong belief in King and the state's continuous thirst for power and wealth. His diplomacy tactics were also influenced by Hindu religion and the social structure which shaped his thinking in terms of types of foreign policies and their application.

## **COMPARING KAUTILYA**

Having looked at Kautilya's approach to war, diplomacy and ethics, it is but important to compare him with Plato and Machiavelli. I chose them because Plato was born before Kautilya and has been considered as the greatest philosopher of all times. His view on state, war and society could have been different because of the geographic origins of these two great minds. I also chose Machiavelli because he is in recent history and also has written extraordinarily on statescraft and both Kautilya and Machiavelli served a king.

### **Kautilya and Plato**

Kautilya and Plato have many similarities in terms of social structure, belief in autocracy, emphasis on virtues of honesty and favoring the elitist in the society. Kautilya endorsed caste structure and approved of lower caste doing menial jobs while Plato strongly favored slavery. But both men never discuss slavery in detail nor do they justify it as an institution. Plato and Kautilya both thought the state should be governed by the learned and elites while despising the idea of democracy. They thought democracy would result in anarchy. Plato and Kautilya liked the idea of a military class and thought that the rulers should come from that sect of the society. In addition they believed in honesty and just behavior by the kings towards their subjects as Kautilya and so did Plato believe in the state of happiness for the Nation.

The important difference comes between these two men come their support for different parts of the society. While Kautilya favored the Brahmins or the priests to make the law and policy he also favored the warriors to be the rulers. In case of Plato, he favored the aristocrats to both rule and act as the intellect for the society. In addition Plato was a

philosopher and not a politician, while Kautilya was a seasoned politician with views on philosophy. This becomes important because Kautilya has been time and again reproached for being harsh and wicked in his treatise but I attribute it to his being extreme side of realism having been a politician. The context in which Plato lived was a group of small states with Athens only as the large empire. In the case of Kautilya, he was part of a large state with centralized bureaucracy and an expanding empire. The other key difference between them was the construction of the state. Plato believed in unity and common good central to the state, while Kautilya thought military to be the focus of the state and a powerful state can be created only by a strong military. In terms of diplomacy, Plato has very little contribution towards foreign policy and in fact thought foreign trade was a negative influence on the state. In contrast, Kautilya has thought about diplomacy and foreign policy elaborately. Similarly these two men differ on their economic policy making where Plato thinks about the State as a provider of rule of law, Kautilya extracts value from the citizens through taxes and redistributes wealth.

Overall I would say that Plato operated in a less complicated environment and his thought process laid the foundation for future European statesman and politicians. In the case of Kautilya he was part of a complicated web and enmeshed in politics hence his treatise is less philosophical and scarcely idealist.

### **Kautilya and Machiavelli**

Kautilya's work comes from his myths and beliefs where as Machiavelli mainly writes based on his experiences and examples from history. One of benefits of Kautilya's work is that this imagination has given his work a robust structure and can last over a period of



time. In addition Machiavelli's work can be considered as one of the possible subsets of Kautilya's statecraft. The weakness of Kautilya's work is that it is not empirical and is not time tested. Yes, some of his writings were used by his King Maurya but they were denounced by King Ashoka as wicked and cunning. In addition the language that Machiavelli uses is very learned while Kautilya uses terse statements which make the point. Though this might look to be more an issue of education and expression, I think language is a representation of diplomacy and suaveness. In general Kautilya has been criticized for being harsh and crude in dealing with spies and espionage and this language differential only vouches for it even more. In my opinion, Machiavelli was a shrewd man and did not want to explicitly write down that was implicitly known.

Machiavelli and Kautilya both believe in one state and endorse imperialism of their emperors in their times. Both these men advocate flexibility and treachery in war. They understand the need for diplomacy but do not dissuade their kings to go to war. They both believe that the populace or the society is to be respected and different traditions need to be tolerated to bring stability within the state. One interesting point here is that it somehow looks like both these men thought that there was a trade-off between internal stability and external war conquests. Also they believe that the religion should serve the state but the difference is that while Machiavelli seems to sometime condemn the religion, Kautilya eschews the religion and believes in the given social and religious structure.

Machiavelli and Kautilya both managed to blur the distinction between utility and morality. Who was more immoral when it came to war is debatable but they were both realists guided not by religion but by their belief in the concept of state and craft needed

to run a state. This was because they were able to clearly distinguish the morals which governed the state and the morals that governed the individual. They both longed for a world order where their state was center, sought social and economic justice and a world order. The distinction only occurs in the world order where Kautilya believes that the world social order should be as per the caste system in India far fetched from Machiavelli's modern world order.

The important question remains as why didn't Machiavelli bother to explain the different tactics of sly war fare or diplomacy as written by Kautilya. It looks like Machiavelli's moderating force came from his desire for a republican virtue unlike Kautilya who had unabashed liking for political realism.

The key learning from Plato, Kautilya and Machiavelli is that all believed in a world order, justice and peace<sup>17</sup>. They did excel on understanding ethics of war and peace and despite different times in history their ideologies on internal v. external relations of a state were not very different.

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<sup>17</sup> *Kautilya ultimately seeks peace but his means are war and thus believes that unless there is a world order where his kingdom is at the center and most powerful one cannot attain peace.*

## CONCLUSION

Kautilya was a statesman of one of a kind in the east especially in India. While he made a great contribution to statecraft and challenging the Hindu religious thinking by vilifying morals in war and justifying the end, I think his key weakness was that he was not a visionary. He was a great thinker with unlimited imagination as his treatise is not written with experiences or drawn from empirical evidences but out of myths and possibilities. He did not manifest any concrete vision for the Mauryan Empire. He proposed the *mandala* concept in war and diplomacy and created intricate web of relations but he did not predict an outcome for this empire. It was the good luck that the progeny of this Empire were even stronger kings and expanded the empire else, the fate would have been similar to what Bismarck faced in Europe.

Kautilya needs to be looked at from today's perspective and one can definitely say that his blind subordination to the social structure is unacceptable. The current social structure is dynamic and driven by both political and economic forces. Kautilya could not advocate any change to this social structure and in fact I think it could be one of the key reasons that India is still deep rooted in social caste system as no great thinker ever challenged it.

What I greatly admire is his quality to manage war and diplomacy. His six diplomacy tools and mandala concept is still applicable albeit the nations are now separated by oceans and there intercontinental ballistic missiles shrinking geographic effects on diplomacy. His work can be directly applied during the De Gaulle times, when there was a fear of Russia attacking the Western Europe and the tactics De Gaulle played were quite similar as proposed by Kautilya.

Kautilya's thinking has definitely shaped the future writings but I wonder what happened to the Indian diplomacy and policies of the statesman of India. The Kautilyan strategies were seldom applied when the Mughals invaded from the middle-east and later the British conquered India. The key question is can Arthashastra be applied in democracies or is it applicable only to Autocracies. Why is that Plato, Aristotle, Kautilya and Machiavelli all advocate the rule of the king supreme and state as the ultimate power? In my opinion art of war and diplomacy is still applicable but one needs to realize that the social structures are changing faster than they did in earlier times.

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>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, "*Kautilya's Concept of Diplomacy*"

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