



NATURE OF KAUTILYAN STATE: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the Kautilyan nature of the state; it would be complete by directing the thoughts of the Arthashastra on the nature of the state. Several questions appear: Was the state an absolute monarchy wherein the ruler's statement stood the ordinance? Was it a monarchy punctuated by a practice of checks and balances, a limited monarchy? Was it a benevolent monarchy, or could it be defined as a welfare state? Was it a centralized bureaucratic condition or a pluralist decentralized system of governance? Was Kautilya's state a federation or unitary in its setup and function? Historians are not unanimous, and even the Arthashastra is not wholly free from the vagueness of these questions.

Keywords: Kautilya, Arthashastra, State, Welfare, Nature.

INTRODUCTION

Any analysis of the Kautilyan nature of the state would be complete by referring to the views of the Arthashastra on the nature of the state. Several queries emerge: Was the state an absolute monarchy wherein the king's word was the law? Was it a monarchy punctuated by a technique of checks and balances, a limited monarchy? Was it a benevolent monarchy, or could it be described as a welfare state? Was it a centralized bureaucratic state or a pluralist decentralized system of government? Was Kautilya's state a federation or unitary in its structure and operation? Historians are not unanimous, and even the Arthashastra is not entirely free from vagueness on these questions.

In Kautilya's monarchical system, the king appears to have extensive authority to rule the nation. The massive list of the king's responsibilities suggests total command and control over the government. Despite this, Kautilya describes the king as a public servant and an agent of the people. He was instructed to seek out the company of the wise and aged, who were thought to be the stewards of society's social and moral order.

So, it is generally accepted that Kautilya opposes the notion of an absolutist state and favours a limited monarchy. Keep remark on his urge that the ruler follows the participatory decision-making concept, which calls for consultation with the *Mantriṇah* and *Mamtripariṣada* during the process. One is brought back to his infamous adage that a single wheel cannot pull the cart because it cannot turn by itself (**Kangle, 1986**).

According to Arthashastra Book I, Chapter 15, even in urgent situations, the council should be called, and its best men's judgement should be followed. However, Kautilya must consistently be clear that the king must follow such guidance. Consultation permanency is implied rather than stated explicitly. For instance, Kautilya recommends the king to designate preceptors or ministers as the bounds of good conduct (for himself), who should prevent him from harm's ways or should prick him with a prod when he is acting improperly in private by (means of) the *Gnomon* or *Nalika's* shadow (water clock) (**Kangle, 1986**).

He maintains that discussions in an adequately organized council must precede all administrative actions (**Kangle, 1986**). Dharma, conventions, and regional usages served as further checks on the king's use of power. The king was granted a wide range of powers, but he utilized them in accordance with the rules of justice and law; he was not beyond the law, even if he was one of its sources. The Arthashastra contains several regulations and practises that control how the person in charge of the state conducts its affairs. The king must adhere to a set schedule to carry out his duties related to the people and the state with little room for error. He was responsible for hearing the people's complaints and issues regularly in a public setting, demonstrating that the country was responsive and responsible rather than authoritarian. For people to achieve the four aims of life— *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kamā*, and *Mokṣa* —and live in harmony and happiness in society, the state must create the right conditions.

A society based solely on contracts is less productive and more prone to anxiety than one based on conscience and compassion. Therefore the king and officials were bound by the moral standards of conduct that paved the way to happiness and prosperity. Moreover, defensive actions are necessary for a social setting where ethics predominates to guard against opportunism (**Sihag, 2014**). It should be emphasized that “an ounce of ethics was better than a tonne of laws” at this point. Ethics and vision could enhance governance and bring long-term prosperity to the entire human race. The modern adage that the state was created for the sake of life and has since continued to exist for a good life is consistent with the Kautilyan conception of the state.

A WELFARE STATE

If the Kautilyan state were any welfare state, that would help us better grasp the character of the state. Although Kautilya does not specifically discuss welfare in his writings, it may be deduced from many passages that a state qualifies to be referred to as a welfare state if it has a special obligation to aid the defenceless and care for the unfortunate.

A welfare state aids people who are unable to aid themselves. The king needed to follow the path of *Yogakṣema* rather than only the path of righteousness. *Prajā Sūkhe Sukhama Rājnaḥ Prajanaṃsahitahitaṃra Natmapriyaṃhitāmarajanaha And Prajānaṃtupriyāmahitama* (in the happiness of the subjects/people lies the happiness of the king and in their welfare, his welfare) are the paths he must take to ensure the material and spiritual well-being of his people. In addition, “*Nāṭyadhikaraḥ Kāryasthe Rājanaḥpriyā Hitaratāḥ*” (**Kangle, 1986**) (peoples’ welfare is an end in itself for the king/state, and political power is a means to that end); states that a good and virtuous ruler should constantly strive to achieve that end. What pleases him could be better; what pleases the subjects is good.

One crucial aspect of the state’s welfare function was to help and assist the people in doing their jobs. Comments from Rao:

Notably, the state had a very high ideal of its civic and social obligations to its citizens. State assistance included taking the initiative to launch private businesses that were experimental in nature and offering professional, scientific counsel and business intelligence. Direct financial support was provided through loans or subsidies to boost production, land gifts, materials provision, and favourable water arrangements.... (Rao, 2016).

In order to promote the manufacturing of specific items or encourage people to conduct their business or trade without difficulty, the state provided direct aid to weaving, agriculture, and dairy products, as well as tax exemptions to specific persons. According to Kautilya, one of the most significant responsibilities of the king was to take care of the inhabitants’ appropriate nutrition and material advancement.

Like modern times, the Arthashastra has drawn attention for its emphasis on labour welfare. The Arthashastra specifies penalties for those who colluded to degrade the quality of the artisans, impede their income, prevent their sale or purchase, or fail to pay wages in accordance with the terms of the contract, as well as harsh fines (**Rao, 2016**). It is true that Aradhana Parmar says that Kautilya lifted this duty to a higher plane when he compared it to offering a significant religious sacrifice. Kautilya again emphasizes this role’s supreme importance in the Arthashastra by stating that while power is strength, happiness is the goal (**Parmar, 1987**).

The government’s responsibilities included caring for the weaker and more vulnerable groups. Kautilya states, “the king shall give maintenance to the aged, infirm, afflicted, and the helpless” (*Bālā*). Additionally, he will provide for the needs of defenceless women throughout pregnancy and the children they give childbirth (**Kangle, 1986**). In addition, “a capable individual, other than an apostate (*Patitā*) or mother, shall be punished with a fee of twelve panas for neglecting to maintain his or her child, wife, mother, father, minor brothers, sisters, or widowed girls (*Kanyā Vidhavāsa*). Even in modern-day India, this social duty of the family’s capable member(s) is an essential component of our social (legal) behaviour.

The capable family member, son, or daughter is legally obligated to care for their parents or a senior citizen. Failing to do so is penalized under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, passed by the Indian Parliament. In Book II, Chapter XXIII, Kautilya establishes the duty of the superintendent of weaving to hire widows, disabled women, girls, mendicant or ascetic women (*Pravrajita*), women compelled to work in

default of paying fines (*Damḍapratikāriṇī*), old women servants of the king, and prostitutes (devadasis) who have ceased to attend temples on service to the king. Kautilya also establish (**Shamastry, 1956**).

Additionally, “those women who do not leave their homes (*Aniṣkasiṇayāḥ*), or whose husbands have left the country, and those who are crippled or girls may, when required to work for a living, be given work (*spinning out threads*) in due courtesy through the medium of maid-servants (*of the weaving establishment*)” (**Shamastry, 1956**). So, as was noted previously, the state has a responsibility to provide for women’s survival needs in specific situations.

By hiring her as a nurse, the state was meant to defend even a prostitute who had lost some of her beauty (*Maiṭrika*). Prostitutes, enslaved women, and older women unable to provide enjoyment (*Bhaganābhogā*) should not be permitted to labour in the king’s kitchen or cabinet (**Shamastry, 1956**). Moreover, prostitutes were shielded from being kidnapped, held captive without their will, or defaced by harm or damage—this type of crime that deserved punishment.

Also, the government’s legitimacy depended on its ability to safeguard the populace from disasters like fire, starvation, floods, diseases, and epidemics. In contrast to fire, which can only wholly or partially destroy a village, floods can carry away hundreds of villages. The same is true of diseases, which can only affect a single region and have treatments available, as opposed to famine, which affects the entire nation and causes a lack of food for all living things.

Kautilya mentions a total of eight catastrophes with divine origins (**Kangle, 1960**). Yet, it is challenging to concur with this interpretation of Kautilya’s because even a sickness like COVID-19 might, if not adequately confined, spread to a wide area, including more than one region and even the entire kingdom. Again, it was the king’s duty to safeguard villages not only from the assaults of courtiers (*Vallabhā*), labourers (*Kārmikasa*), bandits, and border guards but also to prevent herds of cattle from destroying them. The reason behind this was that the hapless villagers, who were always reliant on their crops, required defence against disturbance and harassment. The state also provided farmers with assistance by supplying pastureland in the village (**Shamasastriy, 1915**).

The protection of children is specifically mentioned in Book III, Chapter 12.20, which states that an enslaved person younger than eight years old may not be forced without his will to work abroad. The village elders were entrusted with the care of a minor’s property.

The state defended the employees’ interests against the employer’s excesses by regulating the ties between the two through enforcement of the contracts; by defining the rates and mode of payment of wages and making non-payment or part-payment of wages for entire work punishable’. Even if he did not extract a full day’s work from the labourer, an employer who hired him to do a task was required to pay him for the entire task (**Parmar, 1987**).

But if a labourer failed to do his job, stole anything, or destroyed the object, he would also be punished (Shamasastry, 1915).

In conclusion, it can be said that the essence of the king's obligations lay not only in the fulfilment of the *Rakṣaṇa* and *Pālanā* of the people, but it was also if not more, concerned with the discharge of the function of *Yogakṣema* (welfare), which goes beyond the fundamental duties of the state. The word "welfare" can refer to a population's prosperity, happiness, and well-being, which includes all aspects of economic, social, moral, and legal activity. Moreover, the Kautilyan state "participates practically in full the character of a welfare state today and even goes beyond the present definition of the welfare state by linking it with the idea of human happiness," notes Parmar pertinently (Parmar, 1987).

The critical claim made by V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar that the king was a constitutionalist who supported the welfare of his subjects at all times, in all locations, and at all costs might be used to conclude the discussion on the subject (Dikshitar, 1993). "Solicitude for the well-being here and hereafter of all his subjects, high and poor, is obvious throughout, and it extended even to individuals outside of his borders in an all-embracing humanity," says the poet (Rice, 1879).

A CENTRALIZED BUREAUCRATIC UNITARY STATE

The question of whether the state had a centralized bureaucratic structure with the delegation of functions to the subordinate administrative divisions and whether it was a federal or unitary system is unresolved, as are other concerns. N. C. Bandyopadhyaya is one academic who believes that the state is the epitome of centralized government and administration.

All political and legal authority was vested in the king alone. He served as the nation's chief executive, armed forces commander, and justice arbiter (*Dharamā-Pravartaka*). He gave instructions and interacted directly with government officials. In order to gather information for himself, he deployed spies around the nation to monitor public opinion and all realm officers' behaviour (Bandyopadhyaya, 1938).

Professors R. S. Sharma and Romila Thapar and other historians appear to support this point of view, while J. C. Heesterman, on the other hand, holds that the state in Kautilya was a decentralized one with several peripheral political institutions, signifying a pluralist power structure with numerous co-sharers in sovereignty. Kautilya refers to various supposedly autonomous social and political groups in the shape of *Śrenīsa*, *Pūjā*, *Kula*, *Gaṇa* and *Samgha*. However, it might be argued that it was just in a few select areas, and the monarch was present to control them through laws, rules, and regulations.

For instance, the guilds were permitted to establish guidelines for the benefit of the group. The state did not interfere with the caste/laws society's and customs as long as they were consistent with societal norms as a whole. Radha Kumud Mukherjee goes so far as to claim that the local guilds and associations enjoyed independent

political status and had the authority to enact their laws, rules, and regulations with the commonality of interests, indicating the decentralized and non-unitary character of the state (**Mookerji, 1980**). However, it is interesting to note that deference to the customary laws and practises did not in any way compromise or make ambiguous the status of the king as a secular ruler.

However, other authors who study ancient politics and the political system do not accept the idea that sovereignty was distributed among several centres rather than one location or individual—the king. It might be pointed out that Kautilya suggests nowhere, explicitly or implicitly, that, while recognizing the existence of many social groups and guilds, any institutions were enjoying parallel or coordinated powers with the state or that the state was one of the many associations or ‘an association of associations. In addition, as Krishna Rao noted, the groups never resented or disapproved of state intrusion and never made an effort to limit the scope of the state; instead, they wished for the state to exert its jurisdiction over the entirety of the social and economic life of the society (**Rao, 2016**).

Describing the Kautilyan state as a decentralized administration system with centralized governance would be more accurate. It was simple to rule an empire of that scale from the centre but challenging to run it from there. As a result, it created a structure of delegated authority for the administrative entities established at the village, township, district, and provincial levels. Maintaining law and order, collecting money from all sources, and upholding moral and social order within their different purviews were all regarded as local obligations of the local officials, who were subject to a system of high-level officers’ oversight and control. The fact that a superintendent led several departments to monitor the guild’s operations, including fixing the rate of profits over the fixed price of the local and foreign producers and fining violators, shows that the village affairs were under the supervision of the state.

CONCLUSION

In Kautilya’s Arthashastra, there is mention of a sizable number of local officers, including *Sthānikasa*, *Nāgarikāsa*, *Gopāsa*, and *Anikāsthā* who oversaw the machinery involved in managing the rural and urban districts. The state’s central-level officers also conducted a land survey to determine and assess the village’s tax-paying potential. The explanation, as mentioned above, makes it clear that the Kautilyan state had a unitary monarchical political system with a decentralized structure of administration rather than a federal or a decentralized system of governance.

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