The Kautilya Way

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In a land as culturally, religiously, ethnically and linguistically diverse as India, the British imperialists championed the technique of 'divide and conquer' for nearly a century. To efficiently subdue India's religiously diverse provincial rulers, British political advisers split the Muslim and Hindu monarchs using deceitful practices and sowing discord amongst them. By understanding the effectiveness of such divisive political tactics in order to rule over Indian diversity, the British Raj stayed put in the vast subcontinent for close to a hundred years. But three thousand years before British explorers even set foot on India's coast, a warrior by the name of Chandragupta Maurya unified Indian heterogeneity and established unified India's first monarchical dynasty of the Mauryas. This Bismarckian mission owed its success to Chandragupta Maurya's astute political adviser, Kautilya.

The Mauryan empire extended from modern-day Iran in the west, covering Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia, up to Bangladesh in the east. Its southern boundaries extended into central India. That these vast territories, comprised of people belonging to different races and religions, were ruled for nearly a century speaks volumes about the difference between Britain's divisive political strategies and Kautilya's deliberate interest in political unification and consolidation as opposed to divisions.

Scholars of political science and international relations understand Kautilya to be India's foremost political strategist. Some have even gone so far as to declare Kautilya to be the first great political realist.[1] This is owing to his treatise on the 'science of politics', *The Arthashastra*, written about 300 B.C.E, some eighteen hundred years prior to Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, considered to be the quintessential text on political realism.[2] *The Arthashastra* is an extraordinarily detailed manuscript on statecraft, and is considered to be the most comprehensive political treatise of classical times. In the treatise, Kautilya outlines rules of governance, fundamentals of political organization, details of the treasury and accounting and auditing systems, regulations governing civil servants, law, foreign policy, prescriptions for national defense and war.

Disregarding the debate over *Arthashastra*'s descriptive versus prescriptive nature, political scientists generally tend to agree that "Kautilya was the theorist of the politico-economic basis of the Mauryan state and undoubtedly, the general policy of the *Arthashastra* and that of the Mauryan state were very similar."[3] Therefore, by focusing on this prescriptive angle, Kautilya is understood by many scholars to have been a pragmatic realist, unrelenting in his expositions on the maintenance of stability and security to a monarch's rule, even at the expense of privacy and lack of individual rights.[4] One can understand the extent of this pragmatism while reviewing Kautilya's political advise on the maintenance of stability in domestic politics. To understand this, one needs to couch his political advise in the sociocultural climate of the time. This contextualization will lead readers to understand the radical nature of Kautilya's political opinions.

In Kautilya's India, religion was ubiquitous and invasive. An elaborate form of Hinduism, unlike the one practiced currently, formed the basis of people's identity in the socioeconomic sphere, and also in matters of life and death. The class system (*varnas*) and the caste system (*jatis*) got entrenched in people's private and public lives around Kautilya's time. To this end, Hindu principles were supposed to be a broad framework of guidelines and morals that were meant to provide directions to individual lives, particularly for the attainment of *moksha*, or self-liberation,

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through knowledge (*gyana-yoga*), devotion (*bhakti-yoga*), and duty (*karma-yoga/dharma*).[5] However, they became overly prescriptive in nature, controlling every detail of an individual's life, such as their education, social standing, professional/occupational qualifications, and economic status.

The *varna* system divided Hindu society into four classes: *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (mercantile/trade class) and *Shudras* (slaves, lowest order workers). An individual's placement in the *varna* system defined their education, social and economic status, and also their choice of work. The system was codified in such a manner so as to not facilitate any form of mobility, either upward or downward. In short, this hierarchical system, with the priests occupying the highest rung on the social ladder and the slaves occupying the lowest rung, was also hereditary. The scylla and charybdis of hierarchy and hereditary stagnated the class system, paving the way for rulers to partake of the system's in-built oppression in order to facilitate submission and smooth rule. Furthermore, the *jatis*, or subcastes, that were based on a greater specialization of labor, solidified the *varna*-imposed hierarchy system to an even greater extent.

It was into this penetrating influence of religion on personal lives that one encounters Kautilya's radical advise to rulers. Although a Brahmin by birth, Kautilya "did not acknowledge the supremacy of the Brahmins."[6] In spite of the religiously-sanctioned social power granted to Kautilya owing to his Brahmin identity, he discards that in favor of exercising his control through the mechanism of the state. In fact, he plotted to use the state machinery to break up the combined power of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. Apart from his plots to sabotage the social influence of the two classes, he also advocated for the inclusion of men belonging to the Vaishya and Shudra classes to be a part of the army. For a society as deeply stratified as the Indian society around c. 300 B.C.E, the notion of intermixing social classes, so that they are made to belong to the same occupational level, was a radical idea that received wide scale opposition. Even though the class system systemically nurtured oppression towards the lower classes, Kautilya discouraged the Mauryan kings from perpetuating this social oppression based on class politics.

The pragmatic strategist provides the following justification for his radical class/caste mix-up: oppressive practices breed resentment, and resentments foster rebellions. Therefore, in order to prevent rebellions from within, it is in the ruler's self-interest to promote/appear to promote egalitarianism. This perceived equal treatment would endear the king to his subjects, thereby quelling rebellions from within, while also harnessing support from the local populations in case of an external attack.

In a society dominated by religion, Kautilya's strategies for the consolidation of a monarch's power were dependent on *areligious* factors. In a time period where the prevalent common knowledge was that a monarch's rule was divinely sanctioned, Kautilya held two levels of rule solidification and rule maintenance based on *areligious* principles. On one level, Kautilya based his monarch's rule on the concept of *dharma*, "a word meaning right conduct, duty, law, social justice and responsibility."[7] Although the concept of *dharma* has deep roots in Hinduism and Buddhism, the theory, quite secular in its content, was a practical and workable social ethic, and had little to do with religion or theology. The concept included social ideals such as "tolerance and respect for others, even those with different religions and backgrounds, love of the family, compassion, which includes kindness toward slaves and prisoners."[8] Owing to his adoption of the concept of *dharma* as quintessential to a monarch's rule, Kautilya drifted away from the religiously-sanctioned rule by kings to one based on the concept of duty and social justice.

On the second level of *areligiosity*, one can witness the political shrewdness of the master strategist. Kautilya regarded the state as superior to religion. Understanding the deep role played by religion in people's lives, "he readily gave way to customs and the rules of religion on minor issues of behavior and ritual."[9] For example, in Book 10, Chapter 3 of *The Arthashastra*, Kautilya reveals that "astrologers accompanied the king on military expeditions and were also used to encourage the king's troops."[10] In religious matters of negligible importance, Kautilya permits the use of religious principles to dictate political conduct. However, in Book 8, as Kautilya outlines legal policies for the kingdom, he explicitly undermines religious laws and doctrines over *dharma* laws:

Whenever there is a conflict between the shastras (religious law) and the written law based on dharma, then the written law shall prevail[11]

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In cursorily promoting a few religious practices to enter the political realm, Kautilya placates the masses into letting them believe that his political mandates were also divine mandates. But all the while, "he subtley promotes state power, the king's supremacy, over the demands of class and religion."[12]

Kautilya's political calculus can be expressed by the adage, 'The ends justify the means'. He judges political actions based on their results, and in cleverly understanding that socially oppressive practices will lead to resentment, which in turn, will lead to an unstable rule by the king, Kautilya displays his political acumen in prescribing rules that go against the tide of time. In order for the ruler's position to be secure, he diluted the role played by religion in politics in such a way so as to not make it seem completely *areligious*. His superficial inclusion of religious elements in political conduct was sufficient to depoliticize the population, so as to not foster bitterness among the ruled.

In referring back to the comparison between the British and the Kautilyan use of religion in politics, the former proactively used religious differences to incite violence between rulers belonging to different faiths. This divisive strategy was meant to establish a stronger British foothold in the Indian subcontinent, which subsequently lasted for 90 years. On the other hand, Kautilya's skilled knowledge about India's social practices enabled him to devise his strategies in such a way that was also deceitful, but Kautilya's deceit led to a successful unification of the Indian subcontinent, lasting for 85 years.[13] (1584)

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[1] Roger Boesche, *The First Great PoliticalRealist: Kautilya and his Arthashastra* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002), 1.

[2] Ibid, 2.

[3] Thapar, Romila. *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 80.

[4] Boesche, *First Great Political Realist*, 1.

[5] Ibid, 29.

[6] Ibid, 30.

[7] Ibid, 13.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid, 30.

[10] L.N. Rangarajan, edit., *Kautilya: The Arthashastra* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992), 56.

[11] Ibid, 377.

[12] Boesche, *First Great Political Realist*, 30.

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[13] Ibid, 5.