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Arthashastra as a source of history

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Abstract
This article talks about the ways in which Arthasastra, the ancient Indian text on statescraft could be used as a source of history, using Foucouldian concept of governmentality.

Keywords: Michel Foucoult, governmentality, R. P Kangle, Arthashastra, Kautilya, etc.

Introduction

The Arthashastra, which is a "shastra", or a technical treatise on statescraft, economic policy and military strategy, is traditionally held to be the work of Kautilya or Chanakya, who helped Chandragupta Maurya to overthrow the Nandas and establishing the Mauryan empire. It has been defined variously, and scholars like R.P Kangle define it as a "science of politics", a treatise to help the king in "the acquisition and protection of the earth" [1]. But use of any textual source, and in this case the Arthashastra, for the reconstruction of history, entails with it the rigours of historical analysis. This essay shall take up the issues that come up in the process of reading the text, including authorship, date, the socio-economic milieu etc.

The *Arthashastra* is a very detailed treatise, and the overarching theme seems to deal with statescraft and its various dimensions. But, notwithstanding its imperial leanings, in terms of its guidance on the just mentioned topic, it provides us with a plethora of material which could be used to delve deeper into the contemporary socio-economic (as well as political) milieu of the period. But before moving ahead, one must have a brief overlook of the debate that is there on the date of the text.

The conventional view, as mentioned just a while ago, is that Arthashastra, is a work by Kutilya, also known as Chanakya and Vishnugupta in the fourth century BCE. Two verses respectively in the first and the fifteenth books, say that the work is by Kautilya. Later works like Kamandaka's Nitisara, Dandin's Dashakumaracharita, Vishakhadatta;s Mudrarakshasa and Bana's Kadambari support this traditional view. Yet, in recent times, this view has been questioned. The two verses in the first and fifteenth book have been dismissed as later interpolations. Also, it has been pointed out that there is conspicuous absence of absence of any reference to Kautilya in Patanjali's Mahabhashya, which does otherwise mention the Mauryas and the assembly of Chandragupta Maurya. Megasthenes, the greek emmissary at Chandragupta's court makes no reference to him. Even the Arthashastra itself does not mention Chandragupta Maurya, or any other Maurya personage.

But those who favour the traditional view counter this by saying that the work concerned is a theoretical or a normative text, and not a discriptive text. Hence, it is not at all bound by the need to name any monarch. Also, Patanjali's Mahabhashya is a work on grammer, and mentions personalities only incidentally. As far as Megaasthenes' work is concerned, it survives only as paraphrases in later greek works. So, given this debate, it is conceded among scholars that the work indeed begun in the Mauryan period, and a large chunk of it belongs to this period only. This formulation also does not rule out later interpolations and extrapolations, before final compilation. One must therefore proceed with this cautious view, which does not out rightly reject the text as of not being a source of the Mauryan period.

Being a work on statescraft, there is a definite image of the state that emerges in the text, which seems to be engaged with widespread expansion not only in terms of colonisation of hitherto unsettled regions or on 'old ruins' [2], but also of conquering newer areas through warfare. Considerable hardening of Brahminical position could be seen in the ways colonisation of new lands was supposed to be undertaken. One finds explicit mention of colonising the new lands most preferably with the fourth caste as 'it is serviceable in various ways, plentiful, and permanent' [3]. Also, shudras seem to become agricultural castes now, which they were not. Hardening of Brahminical position can also be seen in the the ordering of eight forms of marriages that appear in Book 3, chapter 2. The first four types have been said to be 'ancestral custom of old' [4] and are supposed to be valid on account of their being approved of by the father. But the later ones,

[1]. R.P.Kangle, *The Kautilya's Arthashastra: Part 2,* Arthashastra: Scope and Origin, 1965, University of Bombay, p.2

[2]. Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, Book 2: The Duties of government superintendents, Chapter 1:Formation of villages

[3].Ibid,

[4] Ibid, Book 3: Concerning Law, Chapter 2: Concerning Marriage, The Duty of Marriage, The property of a woman, and Compensations for Marriage.

especially the last two ones, namely the Rakshasa and Paishacha, which clearly show non-aryan traits, (in the form of abduction and intoxication of the maiden)are incorporated into the scheme, but come only in the end, which shows incorporation with their significant lowering in the ladder of importance. It is proved by the fact that the use of property of women(stri-dhana) in the Rakshasa and Paishacha types of marriages has been typified as a kind of theft [5]. Fines and punishment for selling and mortgaging a person who is not a born slave was also based on varna hierarchy, and higher the position of the person on the societal ladder, more the fine.5 Fine was highes t for a brahmana, that of 48 panas, and lowest for a shudra, that of 12 panas.

One also sees a very entrenched patriarchy because what is being laid out as 'Concerning Laws', clearly favours conforming women. To cite an example, it has been said that a woman can enjoy her property, only if she lives a pious life, that is, she adheres to the societal norms of a chaste and pure life. Also, if she has son or sons, she loses that limited right also, and the right goes to her son or sons. Thus, again women's position is being defined and determined by her male relatives.

There also seems enough provisions to show that women's sexuality was supposed to be strictly kept in check. Book 4 has a chapter named 'Sexual Intercourse With Immature Girls', which time and again keeps stating that 'no man shall have sexual intercourse with any woman against her will'. It initially seems to be a sign of rights enjoyed by women, and a certain chastisement of the wrongdoer, on the part of the law-makers. But when seen in its totality, one also notices that the very same chapter has it that even when a woman out of her own will develops physical relationship with a man, she has to be fined for that also. Hence, women's discretion in matters of her own sexuality, is in no way taken care of [6].

Even in the case of re-marriage, women seem to be on the receiving end. One is not trying to draw a very simplistic picture, and one does indeed note that there are provisions to provide a wife with adequate compensation when the husband re-marries, yet it is quite explicitly stated that a man can marry any number of women, 'for women are created for the sake of sons'.6 Furthermore, one also notices that it was left entirely on the man's discretion whether he wanted to lie with his lunatic wife, or a wife who is afflicted with leprosy, but a women desirous of having sons, could very well lie with men suffering from such diseases [7]. Thus one sees a complete overshadowing of a women's life by conformist ideals, her whole being rendered objectified by the need to produce sons.

Being a work on statescraft, there is a definite picture of state that emerges from the reading of the text. Most importantly, the text defines a state, as composed of seven elements, or prakritis. Book 6(The Source of Sovereign States), chapter 1 is called "The Elements of Sovereignty ", which lists all of these elements. The list orders as follows- the king, the ministers, the country, the fort, the treasury, the army and the friend [8]. It then goes on to describe the traits of each of these seven elements. The king or the monarch appears at the head of the list, and was supposed to be born of a high family, godly, possessed of valour, probity, sharp intellect, strong memory, foresight full, free from vice, etc. The country, according to the text, should have capital cities both in the centre and the extremities of the kingdom. Its fertility should be very high so as to subsist its own people, as well as outsiders during calamities. It should also have cattle wealth, hidden passages, land and waterways rich in various commercial articles, capable of bearing the burden of heavy army and taxation, and finally a loyal population [9].

That treasury is the best which is justly obtained by inheritance or by self acquisition, rich in gold and silver, filled with an abundance of big gems of various colours and of gold coins, and capable to withstand calamities of long duration [10].

The characteristic traits of a good army is that it should come down directly from father and grand-father, strong, obedient, not averse to making long sojourn, invincible and trained in different kinds of warfare, purely composed of the ksatriya caste, etc. Distinctive traits of a best friend is that he is open to conviction and capable of making pre-parations for war quickly and on a large scale [11].

All of these elements, including those whose traits have been discussed, number seven, and are taken to be the 'the limb-like elements', constituting sovereignty. This definition of the state is quite remarkable because no other Indian text defined a state before the Arthashastra. The selective extract given to us also does not throw any light on theoretical issues like origin of kingship, and its principle concern seems to be practical matters of governance.

The ordering of the various elements, seem to constitute an array, in which every preceding element shows a degree of pre-eminence, when compared to the element that follows. There is a scheme that goes into the making of this order of precedence, that had a lot to do with the socio-economic and political milieu of the period.

Earlier on, it has been mentioned that the king or the monarch is the most important of all the elements as it comes first, and this shows that a full-fledged monarchy, with an absolutist ruler, was in place. This is a trend that goes back to a few centuries earlier, to the sixth-fifth centuries BCE, during the second urbanization period, when state had emerged for the first time. Thus, the period saw a strenghthening of a previous trend, in a more fuller form. Hence, the paramountcy to the first element, around which the whole of the discussion revolves. The period of second urbanization also saw large scale monetisation, growth of trade and towns, along with the emergence of state. One also sees a greater importance being laid to the fifth element, the treasury, which quite surprisingly appears even before the sixth element, the standing army, which is such an important constituent of a state.

But perhaps, when seen in the context of contemporary socio-economic and political milieu, the reason is not very difficult to gauge. The standing army, an indispensable part of the

[5] Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, Book 3, Chapter 2
[6] Ibid, Chapter 12
[7]. Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, Book 3, chapter 2
[8] Ibid, Book 6, Chapter 1
[9] Ibid
[10] Ibid
[11] Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, Book 6, Chapter 2

state, requires siphoning of financial resources, in the form of taxes to be maintained. Thus the entire structure of the centralized polity came to hinge upon the ways in which financial resources are mobilised.

It is, therefore no surprise that the Arthashastra has a separate chapter named "Replenishment of Treasury", in book 5 (The Conduct of Courtiers). It discusses a number of tactics to replenish the royal treasury [12]. The means include demand on the part of the king, who faces financial trouble, from his subject one-third or one-fourth of their produce. Those guilty of concealing their produce were to be fined eight times the amount in kind. King's employees could also demand one-sixth of forest produce, as well as produce like cotton, wax, fabrics, barks of trees, silk medicines, bamboos, flesh, and dried flesh. There is also the provision of punishing those, who traded without obtaining a royal license to do so [13].

Merchants dealing in gold, silver, diamonds, pearls, etc were supposed to pay 50 karas. Similarly, other artisanal works like like work with clothes, glass, sandal, medicines, and liquor were similarly taxed. Articles of inferior workmanship, as well as those who keep prostitutes were also to be taxed. Persons rearing cocks and pigs were supposed to surrender half of their stock of animals. Those who dealt with inferior animals were to give one-sixth. Those herdsmen who maintained prostitutes, were to collect revenues with the help of beautiful women.

A number of other tactics are also mentioned, which show near-obsession of the author to fill the royal coffer, many of which may seem to be quite 'mean', because of their association with mild chicanery and treachery. According to the author, spies, disguised as sorcerers, under the pretence of ensuring safety, should carry away the money of the society of heretics, temples, as well as, of dead man, or of a person whose house is burnt, provided that the wealth concerned is not enjoyable to the Brahmanas [14].

Or, the Superintendent of Religious Institutions could collect in one place the various kinds of property of the gods and carry it away to the kings treasury. Or else, he could also proclaim the arrival of gods, by pointing out to the people any of the sacred trees in the king's garden which has produced untimely flowers and fruits. All of the money collected would go to the royal treasury. King's spies could also become partner of some rich merchant, and after a lot of money accumulates, should cause himself to be robbed of the money. Spies could also be used to kill seditious men, by sending one of them in the guise of a doctor, who would then administer them poison, telling it to be medicine.

Hence, one comes across a situation in which the replenishment of the royal treasury seems to be a near obsession with the author, and reason is of course the importance that the treasury played in the smooth functioning of the state, including the maintenance of a standing army.

Such an image of the state, whose agents in the form of spies, are so deeply entrenched in every sphere of daily life of common people, as one gets from above, is invariably one of an extremely centralized one. The state as envisaged, were to have considerable control over matters of economy, and one finds mention of a number of officials who were responsible for looking after various departments. To give an example, the superintendent of commerce was supposed to "ascertain demand or absence of demand for, and rise and fall in the price of, various kinds of merchandise which may be the products either of land or by water path. He shall also ascertain the time suitable for their distribution, centralization, purchase, and sale "[15]. That is, he was given the task of looking after trade, including price fixation and sale of goods produced by state-run manufacturing units. Thus the image is on of an all power-ful monarch, with considerable control over administration, and economy.

Herein comes the issue of the extent of centralization that the Mauryan empire had over the area it ruled. An uncritical reading of Arthashastra as representing the Mauryan period brings out the picture of an extremely centralized state. It is on the basis of such uncritical reading of Arthashastra that scholars initially took Mauryan state to be an extremely centralized One. Scholars like Romila Thapar ([1963]), and others are few of them. But later, from 1970s onwards this view had been started to be questioned. Scholars like I. W. Mabbett and Gerard Fussman questioned the proposition of an extremely centralized state wherein imperial decisions would uniformly percolate downwards from provincial capitals, on various grounds. Firstly, it was made pretty clear that the Mauryan state exercised very little of organised power, and more of arbitrary power, in vast stretches of regions (Mabbett). Though Mabbett merely questioned the proposition, Fussman went a step ahead. He put forth the view of an extremely decentralized empire, in which problems of communication and logistics, a well as regional and linguistic differences made uniform political administration simply unfeasible.

A middle path finally emerged with Thapar's more recent work named "Mauryas Revisited', in which she considerably revised her earlier take on the issue. Her new work was a way departure from both the extremes of a highly centralized or a decentralized polity. She saw the Mauryan state as an amalgamation of the trio of the metropolitan area, the core and the periphery, which were at differing levels of cultural developments. The relationship between the metropolitan area, and the core and periphery was one of exploitation of resources [16]. The metropolitan area meddled with the other two only so far as was required for extracting resources. Hence, there was no question of a uniformly administered empire.

But what is more important to us is that all of these new works raised questions regarding the nature of textual sources used for reconstruction of the history of various aspects of the Mauryan empire. To what extent one could use a textual source for reconstruction of history? What effect should the prescriptive or descriptive nature of a text play when used for such a purpose? What role the class of the author, to which he belonged played into the making of a particular text? If the

[12] Kautilya, Arthashasastra, Book 5, Chapter 2.
[13]. Ibid
[14] Ibid

[15]. Kautilya, *Arthashatra*, Book 2, Chapter 15.
[16] Romila Thapar, *Mauryas Revisited*, 1984, p. 4

nature of a particular text is prescriptive, does it mean always that its take on issues like laws, inheritance, gendered prescriptions to men and women, and also several norms that it sails forth on issues of the ruled and the ruler, were 100 percent "prescriptions' per se? Or, was there an intermingling of "prescriptions", and what actually took place in society in reality? Could there be a scale devised to map the areas where these "prescriptions", and "reality" overlapped, and where they did not?

Coming specifically to the Arthashastra, and going with the view that a large portion of the text indeed belongs to the Mauryan period, a work by Kautilya or Chanakya, could it be that the needs of the time which saw maturation of the process of state formation,(with its roots in the second urbanization period), was an ideology filled with military ethos, based on pragmatic political advise? Or else, was the work a result of a man's personal inclination towards war and warfare, and the art of polity, where dharmashastraic traits of a Brahmana and a ksatriya co-alesced? Or, was it both ways, when a highly accomplished and able political statesman laid out a practical way, by working within an established scholarship of statescraft, bringing both novel attributes, as well as refining older ones? These are questions that are needed to be pondered over, in order to use a text as a source of history.

A sophisticated treatise on statescraft, the work elaborately dwells upon the duties of a king. The state, with the monarch at the apex of the government, was supposed to be a paternalistic figure, concerned with the welfare of his subjects. For instance, chapter 1 of Book 2(The Duties of Government Superintendents), mentions that the king shall regard with "fatherly kindness those who have passed the period of remission of taxes." [17] There are provisions which show active participation of the state in "economic planning "as well, like construction of roads both by land and water, set up market towns, and also carry on mining operations and manufactures. The king was also supposed to protect agriculture from the molestation of oppressive fines, free labour, and taxes; herds of cattle from thieves, tigers, poisonous creatures and cattle disease.20 The state's effort to settle new villages has already been discussed.

The king is also had to provide the orphans (bala), the aged, the infirm, the afflicted and the helpless with maintenance. Even helpless women and their children were to be subsisted by the state [18]. Chapter 13 of Book 3, deals elaborately upon various measures to safeguard the interests of slaves and labourers, and considerable effort has been made to look into there welfare as well. Deceiving a slave of his money or depriving him of the privileges he can exercise as an Arya, is a punishable offence.22 Employing a slave to carry the dead or to sweep ordure, urine, or the leavings of food, keeping a slave naked, hurting or abusing him, or even 'violating' the chastity of female slave meant forfeiture of the value paid for him or her [19]. The repetitive instruction to not to force any woman into physical relationship against her will, has already been mentioned.

Now, with respect to these "welfarist" policies, a lot many scholars tend to call the Kautilyan state, a welfare state [20]. The question is, that to what extent a modern concept can be used to understand an ancient state. Those who are in favour of a welfare state, define it in terms of works like Lord Beveridge's "Full Employment in a Free Society", with parameters like some state run industries, controlling production, markets, prices and sale with a view to safeguard the interest of common people against unscrupulous traders and profiteers; and also to control foreign trade [21]. When seen against such a scale, the Arthashastra seems to present one such state, which is so much pre-occupied with the welfare of its subjects. It had at its disposal a highly organized and efficient bureaucratic machinery as well. But, in toto transposition of modern concepts to ancient times, would lead to anachronism, and is fraught with dangers. A text has to be seen in its own socio-economic and political context, when it itself emerges, rather than using any modern concept.

Not only that, the methodology has be sensitive to not only contemporary socio-economic and political milieu, but also literary-cultural environment, textual markers comprising syntax, lexical choices, metrical devices, etc,. thus paying heed to the "texture " of the text. The methodology, though proposed for reading the seemingly ahistorical pre-modern Indian texts (by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, in "Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800"), could very well be used to unravel an ancient text, to use it for reconstruction of history [22].

Since the work is on polity and statescraft, it is also very important to see what the author has to say regarding various devices to constitute governmentality. This is primarily because, no state can function only on the basis of force alone, and has to gain legitimacy to rule. Governmentality is constituted in multiple ways, and as Michel Foucault defines, it is "The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics " aimed at the subjects, allowing rulers to rule with the subject's consensus.€ [23] Chapter 5 of Book 13(Strategic Means to Capture a Fortress), named "Restoration of Peace in a Conquered Country", seems to fit to what could be called as the monarch's effort to create a certain image of himself, which would become instrumental in bestowing legitimacy to the ruler.

The text goes on and on with suggestions, some of them are as follows- after making a new conquest, the king should cover the enemy's vices with his own, and the enemy's virtues by doubling his own; he should adopt the same mode of life, the same dress, language, and customs as those of the people; should release all the prisoners, and should favour learned men with gifts of land, money and remission of taxes; also,

[17] Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, Book 2, Chapter 1

[18].Ibid

[19] Ibid,Book 3, Chapter 13

[20] Ritu Kohli, *Kautilya's Poitical Theory*, 1995, p8

[21] B.P. Sinha, *Readings in Kautilya's Arhtashastra*, AWelfare State, p.1

[22]. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, Sanjay Subrahamanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India: 1600-1800*, p. 21

[23]. Michel Foucault, *Governmentality*, p.102

whosoever has caused excitement to the people or incurred their displeasure was supposed to be removed by the king, and most importantly, it explicitly states that the ideal conqueror should do all these because in his subject's prosperity lies his own prosperity. Thus, the apparatus devised to win the confidence of the subject people seem to weave well the saga of a king mighty and generous, which would have justified his rule in the eyes of the people.

Therefore finally, it has to be said that while dealing with a text, one has to keep in mind all the possibilities that are there, so as to exhaust it of all of its potentialities, and use it to the fullest, while reconstructing history out of it. Hence, the idea is to take note of differing voices, which speak and also those which does not, so as to fully understand the tensions that are there in the text. In this case, the differing voices is made amply clear through the way the author speaks, who talks by first laying down what is believed to be, and then saying what he seems to be write, many times contradicting his own position, thus giving rise to Arthashastra, "a practical integrative political philosophy."

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