

Kautilya's Arthasastra

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ABSTRACT

Kautilya was the key adviser to the Indian king Chandragupta Maurya (c. 317-293 B.C.E.), who first united the Indian subcontinent in empire. Written about 300 B.C.E., Kautilya's *Arthasastra* was a science of politics intended to teach a wise king how to govern. In this work, Kautilya offers wide-ranging and truly fascinating discussions on war and diplomacy, including his wish to have his king become a world conqueror, his analysis of which kingdoms are natural allies and which are inevitable enemies, his willingness to make treaties he knew he would break, his doctrine of silent war or a war of assassination against an unsuspecting king, his approval of secret agents who killed enemy leaders and sowed discord among them, his view of women as weapons of war, his use of religion and superstition to bolster his troops and demoralize enemy soldiers, the spread of disinformation, and his humane treatment of conquered soldiers and subjects.

Key Words : Kautilya *Arthasastra*, Chandragupta, Soldiers

INTRODUCTION

Kautilya's *Arthasastra* was one of the greatest political books of the ancient world. Max Weber recognized this. "Truly radical 'Machiavellianism,' in the popular sense of that word," Weber said in his famous lecture "Politics as a Vocation," "is classically expressed in Indian literature in the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya (written long before the birth of Christ, ostensibly in the time of Chandragupta [Maurya]): compared to it, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is harmless¹".

Although Kautilya proposed an elaborate welfare state in domestic politics, something that has been called a socialized monarchy², he proved willing to defend the general good of this monarchy with harsh measures. A number of authors have explored these domestic policies, but very few scholars have focused on Kautilya's discussions of war and diplomacy. And yet, his analyses are fascinating and far-reaching, such as his wish to have his king become a world conqueror, his evaluation of which kingdoms are natural allies and which are inevitable enemies, his willingness to make treaties that he knew

he would break, his doctrine of silent war or a war of assassination and contrived revolt against an unsuspecting king, his approval of secret agents who killed enemy leaders and sowed discord among them, his view of women as weapons of war, his use of religion and superstition to bolster his troops and demoralize enemy soldiers, his employment of the spread of disinformation, and his humane treatment of conquered soldiers and subjects.

Historical Background:

Kautilya was the key adviser to—and the genius of the strategy undertaken by—the Indian king Chandragupta Maurya (c. 317-293 B.C.E.), who defeated the Nanda kings (several related kings trying unsuccessfully to rule India together), stopped the advance of Alexander the Great's successors, and first united most of the Indian subcontinent in empire. Kautilya—sometimes called chancellor or prime minister to Chandragupta, something like a Bismarck³ – composed his *Arthasastra*, or "science of politics," to show a wise king how to defeat his enemies and rule on behalf of the

general good. He was not modest in his claims as to how much he helped Chandragupta, noting “This science has been composed by him [Kautilya], who . quickly regenerated the science and the weapon and [conquered] the earth that was under control of the Nanda kings⁴”.

Just after Alexander’s death in 323 B.C.E., Chandragupta and Kautilya began their conquest of India by stopping the Greek invaders. In this effort they assassinated two Greek governors, Nicanor and Philip, a strategy to keep in mind when I later examine Kautilya’s approval of assassination. “The assassinations of the Greek governors,” wrote Radha Kumud Mookerji, “are not to be looked upon as mere accidents⁵”. By taking much of western India (the Punjab and the Sindh) from the Greeks and concluding a treaty with Seleucus (Alexander the Great’s Greek heir to western India), Chandragupta and Kautilya succeeded in bringing together almost all of the Indian subcontinent. As a result, Chandragupta was, and is now, considered the first unifier of India and the first genuine emperor or king of India⁶.

The Mauryan Empire established by Chandragupta and continued by his son Bindusara (c. 293-268 B.C.E.)—whom Kautilya also advised—and by his grandson Ashoka (c. 268-232 B.C.E.) was, and still is, astonishing. With a population of about fifty million people, the Mauryan Empire was larger than the Mughal Empire two thousand years later and even larger than the British Empire in India, extending in fact all the way to the border of Persia and from Afghanistan to Bengal⁷. (The map on the previous page shows the extent of the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka) Pliny—borrowing from Megasthenes, the ambassador of Seleucus to Chandragupta—wrote that Chandragupta’s army totaled about six hundred thousand infantry, thirty thousand cavalry, eight thousand chariots, and nine thousand elephants⁸. Chandragupta’s capital was Pataliputra (near modern Patna in northeast India, just below Nepal), which he apparently seized from the Nandas sometime between 324 and 322 B.C.E. Pataliputra was probably the largest city in the world at that time, a city eight miles long and a mile and one-half wide, with 570 towers and sixty-four gates, all surrounded by a moat six hundred feet wide and forty-five feet deep. Also protecting the city were wooden walls—stone was very scarce—with slits to be used by archers⁹. Pataliputra “was about twice as large as Rome under Emperor Marcus Aurelius¹⁰”.

Chandragupta Maurya consolidated an empire and passed it down intact to his son Bindusara, about whom

we know little, and to his grandson Ashoka. Some argue that the extreme measures that we will see Kautilya advocate, and some of which Chandragupta surely must have employed, were necessary to bring order and the rule of law out of chaos¹¹, making possible the emergence of Ashoka, who was widely regarded as one of the finest kings in world history. M.V. Krishna Rao contends, “As a result of the progressive secularisation of society due to the innovations contemplated by [the *Arthashastra*] and the administration of Chandragupta, the country was prepared for the reception of the great moral transformation ushered in by A’shoka and his administration¹²”. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri has written, in a fairly typical statement, “The reign of A’s-oka forms the brightest page in the history of India¹³”.

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* is thus a book of political realism, a book analyzing how the political world does work and not very often stating how it ought to work, a book that frequently discloses to a king what calculating and sometimes brutal measures he must carry out to preserve the state and the common good. One important question lurks in discussions of Kautilya. Were the harsh actions he often recommended necessary for the common good of India? Did Chandragupta and Bindusara have to act in a violent and sometimes brutal fashion to defend India, bring order, and establish unity¹⁴? With the old order crumbling, with the Nanda kings having proved cruel and inept, with enemies on India’s borders, and with the threat of anarchy within, were not Kautilya’s harsh measures necessary and have not his critics failed “to note the nature of the times in which he lived¹⁵”? In defense of Chandragupta and Kautilya, Bhargava says, “all kinds of means might have been considered necessary to restore peace with honor¹⁶”. Put more bluntly, did India need the harsh measures of Kautilya the realist in order to enjoy the luxury of Ashoka the idealist?

Kautilya and His “Science of Politics”:

R. P. Kangle translates the word *arthashastra* as “science of politics¹⁷,” a treatise to help a king in “the acquisition and protection of the earth¹⁸”. Others translate *arthashastra* in slightly different ways: A. L. Basham says it is a “treatise on polity¹⁹,” Kosambi emphasizes the economic importance of the word in calling it a “science of material gain²⁰,” and G.P. Singh labels it a “science of polity²¹”. I happen to prefer to translate *arthashastra* as a “science of political economy,” but however one translates the word, Kautilya claimed

to be putting forth what Heinrich Zimmer rightly calls “timeless laws of politics, economy, diplomacy, and war²²”.

Because he was offering his readers a science with which they could master the world, Kautilya believed that having a passive stance toward the world—for example, trusting in fate or relying on superstition—was outlandish. “One trusting in fate,” noted Kautilya, “being devoid of human endeavor, perishes.” His philosophy called for action, not resignation: “The object slips away from the foolish person, who continuously consults the stars; . . . what will the stars do?” In urging the king to rely on science and not the precepts of religion, Kautilya separated political thought from religious speculation.

Diplomacy and Foreign Policy as Extensions of Warfare:

As a political realist, Kautilya assumed that every nation acts to maximize power and self-interest, and therefore moral principles or obligations have little or no force in actions among nations. While it is good to have an ally, the alliance will last only as long as it is in that ally's as well as one's own self-interest, because “an ally looks to the securing of his own interests in the event of simultaneity of calamities and in the event of the growth of the enemy's power.” Whether one goes to war or remains at peace depends entirely upon the self-interest of, or advantage to, one's kingdom: “War and peace are considered solely from the point of view of profit.” One keeps an ally not because of good will or moral obligation, but because one is strong and can advance one's own self-interest as well as the self-interest of the ally, for “when one has an army, one's ally remains friendly, or (even) the enemy becomes friendly.” Because nations always act in their political, economic, and military self-interest, even times of peace have the potential to turn abruptly into times of war, allies into enemies, and even enemies into allies. Burton Stein notes correctly that Kautilya was describing a foreign policy not of a great empire like that of the Mauryas, but of small warring states in incessant conflict, such as India experienced before the Mauryan empire. Kautilya probably assumed that peaceful empires cannot last forever, and that conflict among smaller states is more common in history.

For Kautilya, this principle of foreign policy—that nations act in their political, economic, and military self-interest—was a timeless truth of his science of politics, or *arthashastra*. He did not believe that nations never act

in an altruistic manner—indeed, Kautilya advocated humanitarian acts that also coincided with one's self-interest—but he did believe that one must assume, if entrusted with political or military power, that one's neighbors will eventually act in their own interests. Put another way, one would be betraying one's own people if one did not assume a worst-case scenario. A nation forced to rely on the kindness of neighboring states is weak and, unless it can change rapidly, doomed to destruction. This same assumption can be seen in the work of Thucydides, who discussed foreign policy a century before Kautilya, and in the thoughts of the Chinese Legalist Han Fei Tzu, who wrote about fifty years after Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.

In reading his *Arthashastra*, we find no moral considerations other than a king doing what is right for his own people. Rather, we discover merely what Kautilya regarded as the nature of power. The king, he wrote, “should march when by marching he would be able to weaken or exterminate the enemy”. And Kautilya assumed that every other state would act in a like manner because “even the equal who has achieved his object tends to be stronger, and when augmented in power, untrustworthy; prosperity tends to change the mind”. Just as did Thucydides, Kautilya regarded a request for negotiations as a sign of weakness, indeed a desperate act of a weak nation trying to survive: “A weaker king may bargain with a stronger king with the offer of a gain equal to his troops, when he is in a calamity or is addicted to what is harmful [that is, women, wine, or gambling] or is in trouble. He with whom the bargain is made should fight if capable of doing harm to him; else he should make the pact”.

War:

Kautilya thought there was a “science” of warfare, presumably part of a larger science of politics. The Commandant of the Army, he suggested, should be “trained in the science of all (kinds of) fights and weapons, (and) renowned for riding on elephants, horses or in chariots”. Just as Machiavelli advised his prince to attend to matters of warfare constantly, so did Kautilya advise the king not to leave military matters entirely to others: “Infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants should carry out practice in the arts outside (the city) at sun-rise. The king should constantly attend to that, and should frequently inspect their arts”. Just as the king's agents spied on officials in the state bureaucracy, so too must the king

have spies to assess the loyalty of soldiers. What greater threat is there to a king than having a military coup remove him from power? Kautilya recommended that “secret agents, prostitutes, artisans and actors as well as elders of the army should ascertain with diligence, the loyalty or disloyalty of soldiers”.

In his section on foreign policy, Kautilya wrote a startling sentence: “Of war, there is open war, concealed war and silent war”. Open war is obvious, and concealed war is what we call guerrilla warfare, but silent war is a kind of fighting that no other thinker I know of has discussed. Silent war is a kind of warfare with another kingdom in which the king and his ministers—and unknowingly, the people—all act publicly as if they were at peace with the opposing kingdom, but all the while secret agents and spies are assassinating important leaders in the other kingdom, creating divisions among key ministers and classes, and spreading propaganda and disinformation. According to Kautilya, “Open war is fighting at the place and time indicated; creating fright, sudden assault, striking when there is error or a calamity, giving way and striking in one place, are types of concealed warfare; that which concerns secret practices and instigations through secret agents is the mark of silent war”. In silent warfare, secrecy is paramount, and, from a passage quoted earlier, the king can prevail only by “maintaining secrecy when striking again and again”. This entire concept of secret war was apparently original with Kautilya.

And thus, a king’s power, for Kautilya, is in the end tied to the power and popular energy of the people, without which a king can be conquered, for “not being rooted among his subjects, [a king] becomes easy to uproot”. Although Kautilya wrote of using money to raise an army and even of “purchasing heroic men,” he was not advocating mercenaries who fought only for pay, but he was merely outlining the cost of paying, supplying, and feeding soldiers. He believed that “hereditary troops are better than hired troops”; in other words, troops made of men born in the kingdom and thus loyal to the king since birth are better than strangers fighting for money, as Machiavelli noted so often later. It is not at all clear, remarked Kautilya, that “inviting alien troops with money” is an advantage or a disadvantage.

Which States to Attack:

In Kautilya’s view of the world, expansion by a prosperous kingdom was inevitable, natural, and good,

and as a consequence, moral considerations did not enter into his deliberations, only what was for the good of the kingdom. If a king can win, then he should go to war. As Kangle says, the *Arthashastra* “preaches an ideal of conquest”. But who should be attacked? This is not an ethical question. The decision takes only careful calculation and observes the principle that a king should attack weakness. Certain states are vulnerable. If a state is unjust, then its people will welcome a deliverer from a tyrannical king; if a kingdom is weakened from a poor economy, or if a state has experienced some kind of calamity ranging from fires to flood or famine, then a king “should make war and march.” As Rajendra Prasad says, Kautilya believed that “whenever an enemy king is in trouble, and his subjects are exploited, oppressed, impoverished and disunited, he should be immediately attacked after one proclamation of war”.

Every adjacent kingdom should be looked upon as an enemy and classified. If a kingdom is strong, Kautilya called it a “foe”; if a kingdom is suffering calamity, then it is “vulnerable”; if a kingdom has weak or no popular support, then “it is fit to be exterminated.” Even if one cannot attack a strong neighbor or “foe,” one can harass it silently and weaken it over time. What Kautilya called an enemy “fit to be exterminated” was an enemy with little or no popular support, an enemy whose subjects quite likely would desert to Kautilya’s attacking army. And Kautilya argued, or perhaps assumed, that imperial expansion was the correct goal: “After conquering the enemy’s territory, the conqueror should seek to seize the middle king, after succeeding over him, the neutral king. This is the first method of conquering the world. And after conquering the world he should enjoy it divided into *varnas*. . . in accordance with his own duty”.

Using Secret Agents, Assassins, Disinformation, and Propaganda:

Kautilya was ready to use almost any means of violence in fighting a war, although he wanted his king to direct his violence toward the leaders of the opposing kingdom and not toward ordinary people. For example, Kautilya discussed at length how to employ poison, but almost always directed its use at key enemy commanders. He advised that when “giving unadulterated wine to the army chiefs, [the secret agent] should give them (wine) mixed with poison when they are in a state of intoxication”. Whereas Kautilya did suggest that an army laying siege to a fort try to “defile the water,” this

measure seems designed to make those in the fort surrender from illness, not to kill everyone in the fort. Mostly, Kautilya addressed the question of how to assassinate a king—by hiding “inside the image of a deity or a hollow wall” and emerging at night, by making something heavy fall on the king, or by using women as secret agents to “drop on him serpents or poisonous fire and smoke”. Kautilya was willing to use any possible means to assassinate an enemy king—drown him, burn him with fire, suffocate him with smoke, or even use crocodiles as assassins, not to mention employing women and children as poison-givers. The wonder of assassination, according to Kautilya, is that it is so efficient, “for, an assassin, single-handed, may be able to achieve his end with weapon, poison and fire. He does the work of a whole army or more.” In an unrealistic passage in the *Dharmasutras* that Kautilya most certainly ignored, the authors directed that a king should not “strike with barbed or poisoned weapons”!

Aside from assassination, another method used to defeat an enemy without full-scale battle was to arrange for the enemy to quarrel and fight among itself. We have already seen how Kautilya intended to use beautiful women to instigate fights among high officers or officials. If the promise of pleasure can ignite quarrels, so can the promise of power. One should arrange for a secret agent, disguised as an astrologer, to tell a high officer that he has all the marks of a king, and similarly arrange for a female secret agent, the wife of this officer, to complain that the king wants to keep her in his harem. A third secret agent who is a cook or a waiter should lie, saying that the king has ordered him or her to poison the high officer. “Thus with one or two or three means,” according to Kautilya, the king “should incite the high officers one by one to fight or desert” the enemy king. In a discussion about sowing dissensions among oligarchies, Kautilya suggested that “assassins should start quarrels by injuring objects, cattle or men at night,” “should stir up princelings enjoying low comforts with (a longing for) superior comforts,” and “should start quarrels among the followers of the chiefs in the oligarchy by praising the opponents in brothels and taverns”. The goals were constantly to “sow discord” and to foment and inflame “mutual hatred, enmity and strife”.

Much of this advice violated the tacit code of war found in the great Indian epics. The assassination of envoys and the use of poison were considered to be against the rules of warfare and thus not honorable.

Said *The Laws of Manu*, “Fighting in battle, [the king] should not kill his enemies with weapons that are concealed, barbed, or smeared with poison or whose points blaze with fire”. Spies were common in Indian history, but not spies who assassinated enemy officials and started quarrels among enemy leaders. An excellent book on warfare in ancient India discusses spies, but does not mention secret agents as assassins. Once more Kautilya judged the means by the result, and the result he sought was the general good of his kingdom.

Another military tactic that Kautilya praised was what we now call disinformation or propaganda designed to demoralize or frighten enemy soldiers. For example, secret agents should appear as messengers to troops saying, “Your fort has been burnt down or captured; a revolt by a member of your family has broken out; or, your enemy or a forest chieftain has risen (against you)”. After spreading the rumor that the Regent or a high administrator of the enemy king has announced that the king is in trouble and may not come back alive and thus people should take wealth by force and kill their enemies, secret agents should kill and steal at night, trying to cause civil upheaval: “When the rumour has spread far and wide, assassins should rob citizens at night and slay chiefs, (saying at the time), ‘Thus are dealt with [those] who do not obey the Regent’. Then they should put bloody evidence in the Regent’s residence. Again, secret agents should spread rumors, always in a confidential manner, that the king is furious with such and such a leader. Then these agents should assassinate key leaders and say “to those who have not been slain, . . . ‘This is what we had told you; he who wants to remain alive should go away’”. Kautilya was especially fond of the tactic of utilizing disinformation to flatter a second or third son and thus persuade him to try a coup against his own family. Convinced that disinformation could also inspire his own troops, Kautilya wanted agents to announce fabricated victories and fictitious defeats of the enemy: “On the occasion of a night-battle, [secret agents] should strike many drums, fixed beforehand as a signal, and announce, ‘We have entered it; the kingdom is won’”.

Conclusion:

To return to Machiavelli’s *The Art of War* after reading the military writings of Kautilya is jolting. It becomes readily apparent that Machiavelli is not even trying to tell us something new about warfare, because

he believed the ancient Greeks and Romans knew it all—aside from such things as artillery. What did Machiavelli want to resurrect from ancient Rome and transport to Renaissance Florence? He wanted Rome's battalions and legions and cohorts, and maybe Scipio once again arrayed across the plain from Hannibal. And thus compared to Kautilya and Sun Tzu, Machiavelli's writings on warfare are tired and tedious, filled with nostalgia for long-dead legions that once gained glory. He wanted the public battlefield, the grand spectacle, fame for some and cowardice for others. Sun Tzu and Kautilya did not care a whit for glory and fame. They wanted to win at all costs and to keep casualties—on both sides—to a minimum. Said Sun Tzu, "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." They were also prepared to win in ways Machiavelli would regard as dishonorable and disgraceful—assassination, disinformation, causing quarrels between ministers by bribes or by means of jealousy over a beautiful woman planted as a secret agent, and so on. Machiavelli—who offers no systematic discussion of even guerrilla warfare—would have been easily outmatched by generals reading either Sun Tzu or Kautilya.

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