

Kautilya's Arathashastra: An Intellectual Portrait:
The Classical Roots of Modern Politics in India

Subrata K Mitra & Michael Liebig
Nomos, Baden-Baden, Germany, 2016
(Pages 568, Euros 99)

This book is indirectly an outgrowth of Michael Liebig's doctoral thesis on Kautilya, published in German in 2014, which was a seminal work that followed in the tradition of Max Muller of mining and re-presenting ancient Indian knowledge for contemporary readers. The authors craft a masterly narrative, tightly researched and sweeping in its ambit. The work deserves serious attention for its depth and originality. It is good that an Indian edition of the book, presumably at an Indian price, will be available in the coming months.

The book makes a cardinal point: as widely known, the best translations of the *Arathashastra* are by RP Kangle in English and JJ Meyer in German, but like other translators, they are Indologists and scholars of Sanskrit, unfamiliar with this classic's subject, which the book calls 'a foundational text of Political Science', in terms of 'units of analysis, ideas and concepts as well as methodology'. The co-authors have an advantage in their easy access to these translations in two languages, permitting deeper insight into the *Arathashastra* than might otherwise be available. I am reminded that back in 1994, at a small luncheon in Berlin, Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao had suggested to the invited 14 top German Indologists, that ideally joint teams of linguists and subject specialists, should handle translations of ancient Indian texts, to gain full insight into ancient knowledge. Alas, this simply does not happen, even in India.

The book also flags another challenge: the idea-concepts of a pre-modern text cannot simply be squeezed into categories that have emerged subsequently; this applies to Kautilyan nuances that have not been addressed by modern political science. The co-authors turn to Max Weber's three essays of 1916-17 on Hinduism in which Weber had described the Kautilyan state, conditioned by 'power politics' in inter-state relations and domestic politics – that term was not negatively charged with ethical values, but was rather was an expression of political rationality.

Arranged in five sections, the book begins with an absorbing, detailed interpretive exposition of the *Arathashastra*. One of Kautilya's firsts is his treatment of intelligence activities, outside and within the state in 'a scholarly and comprehensive manner', comparable only to Sun-Tzu. Similarly state power is not simply the capacity for *danda* (means of violence), but the aggregate of the seven state elements, *saptanga prakriti*; in Kautilya's words: 'The power of knowledge is the power of counsel, the power of the treasury and the army is the power of might and the power of valor is the power of energy.' For the authors this represents 'a holistic-substantive idea of power for which there is no

precedent’; they see ‘remarkable homologies’ to this in Hans J Morgenthau’s concept of national power, which he presented in *Politics Among Nations* (1951).

The book’s 220-page second section examines Kautilya’s influence on Nehru, and the Indian strategic community, detailing views amassed in the 34 interviews conducted in India in 2012, and some more in Germany. Nehru had clearly studied the *Arathashastra* closely, and kept a copy at his bedside. Yet it is only around 2010 that Indian academia has returned to a serious study of this text. The third section addresses re-use of the past and the making of modern politics, lauding ‘...the ability of the designers of modern Indian institutions to tap into the endogenous reservoir of stateness’. The fourth part covers India and global political theory, especially focused on what the authors call India’s ‘counter-factual’ democracy – that qualifier is explained in terms of describing a phenomenon whose existence could not be anticipated in terms of the classic theory of democracy. India’s hybrid model owes in part to its classical tradition and its capacity to build institutions that draw on its classic heritage that includes the consent of the governed. A short fifth and final section asserts that India is at its ‘Kautilyan moment’ and concludes: ‘Kautilyan thought is implicitly present in the strategic thinking and behavior patterns of the Indian elites’.

Though we are Kautilya’s legatees, contemporary India has yet to imbibe, much less apply cogently and comprehensively, this ancestral wisdom in its policy, external and internal. And yet, Kautilya now draws serious attention across India; at our institutions of learning, partly thanks to recent research at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, the *Arathashastra* is finally on the curriculum. This volume will significantly aid this process of understanding and reinforcing study of Kautilya.

Kishan S Rana
Emeritus fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi
kishanrana@gmail.com

[Published in *Business Standard*, in 2016]
