

The *Arthaśāstra* in a Transcultural Perspective:
Comparing Kautilya with Sun-Zi, Nizam al-Mulk, Barani and Michiavelli

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The Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi, is making a remarkable contribution to Kautilya studies, plus a service to scholarship and Indian heritage as rare as it is welcome. The IDSA Library runs a ‘Kautilya Desk’, storing a growing body of new material, in a spirit of dedication. A contributor to this volume, Col. Pradeep Gautam (Retd), supported by the current and former IDSA Directors and others, supervises this project. IDSA also collaborates with Germany’s South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University and Singapore National University’s Institute of South Asian Studies. This book is a result of two conferences held by these entities in 2015 and 2016.

Michael Liebig stumbled upon Kautilya some years back, searching for a doctoral dissertation theme; this former journalist, then in his 50s, had sought a career shift. That story is delightful in its serendipity, and evokes memory of another German enamored with India studies, Max Muller – in his case in the 19th century, heyday of colonialism, when the likes of John Stuart Mill, rejected the very notion of a cultured India. Anyone interested in that paradox would profit from Uday Mehta’s brilliant study, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (1999).

Coming after IDSA’s 3-volume series, *Indigenous Historical Knowledge – Kautilya and his Vocabulary* (2015, 2016), this book ‘seeks to situate Kautilyan thought firmly in a political science frame’. This is a persisting theme in the Introduction: ‘the *Arthaśāstra* has to be characterized as a (pre-modern) work of Political Science and IR theory...the category of *raison d’état* is absent in the *Arthaśāstra*, while the idea of *raison d’état* permeates the work’. Kautilya’s *raison d’état* not only works to maintain and expand the power of the state but also for ‘ensuring the safety and security of the people’. It cites Morgenthau who spoke of ‘the classical philosophies of China, India and Greece’ that traced the roots of Political Realism, referring to Sun-Zi, Kautilya and Thucydides. (Morgenthau’s familiarity with the *Arthaśāstra* is evidenced in the five references made to it in his *Dilemmas of Politics*).

The Introduction rails against the ‘indigenism’ discourse that Indian scholars have themselves espoused and accommodated (the writings of Atul Mishra and, to an extent Kanti Bajpai, are examples), which has had the effect of marginalizing India’s pre-modern resources. The co-editors also challenge another false track, a la Stuart Gray, that Kautilya was a ‘Hindu’ thinker, imposing on him the false label of offering a ‘theological’ ethic. There exist other example of serious undervaluation of Kautilya, say in GR Berridge’s *Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2003); many others in the West have simply ignored

him. Today's Kautilya scholars do not proclaim an Indian school of IR, but use the *Arthasāstra* to reimagine IR in India.

The core of the book addresses intracultural and intercultural idea-migration and the hybridization this entails, postulating that of the two it is the intercultural element that is more important. It brings to the lay reader lucid comparison and contrasts in Kautilyan governance methods with other, oft-understudied historical figures – China's Sun-Zi and *The Art of War*; Persia's Nizam Al-Mulk and *Siyāsatnāma*; Muslim-Indian Ziya Barani and *Fatāwā-ye jahāndāri*; the book also explores well-known Italian Machiavelli and *Il Principe* and *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*. Other essays look at the influence of pre-Kautilyan sources on the *Arthasāstra*, the flow of Kautilyan thought in Indian history, its impact on the institutional design of post-1947 India, and theorizing the *Arthasāstra* as a text.

As a sample of this book's riches, consider the long chapter by Liebig that compares Kautilya and Machiavelli. He postulates that both were political thinkers, and while there are 'conceptual homologues' between them, there are also differences. Liebig looks to five areas. 1. Kautilya's statecraft is not utopian but rooted in empirical analysis of political reality; Machiavelli takes a similar approach. Both are secular, separating politics from religion. 2. Kautilya's ruler must channel his impulses and urge to dominate through self-discipline, ethics and law. For Machiavelli, greed is a very natural, ordinary thing, and men act right through dread of punishment ('morality is the product of power'); this leads to 'ethics of politics' in EH Carr's words. 3. Kautilya does not discuss any alternative to absolute monarchy, and emphasizes the education and character formation of the ruler. Machiavelli considers republics, but believes that even these have to be the work of one individual; he devotes the longest chapter in *Discorsi* to conspiracies that arise when the ruler violates the person, honor or possessions of his subjects. But Machiavelli does not offer a systematic conceptualization of the state, unlike Kautilya, or provide an ideal-model; nor does he offer a detailed conception of the state's economic tasks. 4. Both these greats offer their versions of *raison d'état*, but Kautilya details these with his *saptāṅga* matrix of seven state factors, plus the six measures of foreign policy (*sādgunya*). 5. For Kautilya 'the welfare of the people, and the well-being of his subjects must be rated higher than that of the king himself', as Charles Dreke puts it. Kautilya is concerned with not just preservation of the state but also its expansion (this is part of his normative message, in the context of the Gupta empire); for the sake of conquest, Kautilya also advocates what would today be seen as political immorality.

Liebig and other contributors note that Kautilya benefited from Indian works of an antecedent time, material that is now lost. He also drew inspiration from Persian works. This book shows that the *Arthasāstra* and its ideas traveled in some fashion to Europe, in much the same manner as Indian mathematical concepts (including 'Arabic' numerals) migrated, as Bharat Karnad has also posited. Some scholars have noted that European thinkers, including Machiavelli, rest in the shadow of Asia. Adda Bozeman's *Politics and Culture in International History* (1960) demonstrates the patterns of such idea-migration.

Some other essays: Subrata K Mitra speaks inter alia of a hybrid Indian Personal Law and notes that India's 'hybrid modern state with a Kautilyan core has kept the divisive issues of the sacred and the secular within the bounds of the rule of law'. Let us also not forget Jawaharlal Nehru's deep study of the *Arthaśāstra*, evidenced in his *Discovery of India*; the strong state centrism of the Indian Constitution surely owes partly to Kautilya. MS Prathibha's comparison with Sun-Zi concludes that for both established armies, and a network of spies are integral to the state; both advocate wisdom in warfare, including moral compulsions, and welfare of the people as the king's highest duty. That parallel, of course located in the cultural context of each, also extends to the use of ambiguity and deception. Saurabh Mishra looks at *Rajadharma* (political ethics), legitimacy and sovereignty, to posit that an apparent absence of ethics and moral aspects in the *Arthaśāstra* is because these elements are embedded in Kautilya's science of inquiry (*Ānvīksikī*), which is the philosophical base of all the methods and actions he recommends.

Many will wonder why the *Arthaśāstra* was not earlier understood in the context and depth that these and other recent scholars have furnished. Partly this is because Kautilya does not explicitly offer a doctrine or theory; those elements, and the underlying concepts, must be inferred from his methods and prescriptions, i.e. teased out of a text that is bland, indirect, even elliptic. Further, the language scholars that prepared the translations, not being scholars of political science, have often not grasped the governance and statecraft context. Those, like Liebig, with knowledge of German enjoy parallel access to translations in that language, for deeper analysis.

A work of such academic excellence faces a challenge in reaching wide readership. It assumes familiarity with social science jargon at a level of complexity that can defeat many lay readers. Terms such as 'eigenvalue', 'hybridity', and 'indigenism' need explanation, without which the elegant and important message offered does not always fully get through. It should be a concern for an agency such as IDSA that young scholars across different disciplines, plus informed readers access their pioneering work, within and outside India.

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