

Features of Indian Political Thought- Post Vedic Era – An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the **Indian political thought**, after Vedic period Kautilya and his Arthashastra are widely acknowledged as the thinker and text that best delineate the broad contours of the **political** and administrative system in **ancient India**. The Vedic age itself is divided into the Early Vedic Period (c.1500 – 1200 BCE) and Later Vedic Period (c.1100 – 500 BCE). Before the Mauryan Empire, the Indian subcontinent was fragmented into hundreds of kingdoms that were ruled by powerful regional chiefs who engaged in warfare using their small armies. In 327 BCE, Alexander of Macedon and his troops entered India and overran the existing kingdoms in the Punjab region. He left after only two years, but his destruction of the regional powers opened the opportunity for other groups to seize control. The first group, the kingdom of Magadha, used their military to gain control of trade routes through the Ganges valley and the sea routes to the Bay of Bengal. Soon after, however, Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Maurya Empire, successfully seized control of Magadha. He started on the outskirts and eventually made his way to the heart of the kingdom. Eventually, he gained control of northwestern India and Bactria—what is today Afghanistan and was at that time controlled by the Greeks. Chandragupta Maurya successfully unified the Indian subcontinent under an empire.

Chandragupta ruled from 324 to 297 BCE before voluntarily giving the throne up to his son, Bindusara, who ruled from 297 BCE until his death in 272 BCE. This led to a war in which Bindusara's son, Ashoka, defeated his brother and rose to the throne in 268 BCE, eventually becoming the most successful and powerful ruler of the Maurya Dynasty. The Mauryan Army, the largest standing military force of its time, supported the expansion and defense of the empire. According to scholars, the empire wielded 600,000 infantry, or foot soldiers, 30,000 cavalry, or soldiers on horseback, and 9,000 war elephants. A vast spy network collected intelligence for both internal and external security purposes. Although Emperor Ashoka renounced offensive warfare and expansionism after converting to Buddhism, he maintained this standing army to protect the empire from external threats and maintain stability and peace across Western and Southern Asia. This extensive army was made possible partly through an intricate web of administration. One of Chandragupta's advisors had instituted a series of detailed procedures which Ashoka inherited. Ashoka established a capital at the walled city of Pataliputra, which served as the centralized hub of the empire. Officials made decisions about how to collect taxes for the central treasury, which funded the military and other government jobs.

Key words: Indian political thought, Mauryan, Arthasastra, post vedic

Introduction

When there was renewed interest in and exploration of Indian philosophy and political thought during and after the Indian Renaissance in British India, the streams of the initial rediscoveries tended to flow into one of the following channels: (a) Orientalist-Indological (b) nationalist (c) idealist-philosophical and (d) the pluralist-philosophical concerns with varieties of schools of Indian philosophy and thought. Orientalism or its India-centered vision made pioneering discoveries of texts and later of forgotten and obscure Eastern/Indological/Indian traditions in the realm of letters and arts, and it projected them as distinctly different traditions from the Western ones.

The nationalists were primarily concerned with bringing to light ancient Indian concerns with political ideas and institutions, systems of law and living, and transcendent nationalistic identities beyond tribe, caste, and other forms of ethnicity. The nationalist stream, in the present context, is represented by K. P. Jayaswal's *Hindu Polity*, which tried to demonstrate during the nationalist movement that ancient India had had democratic ideas and institutions. The best protagonist of the idealist-philosophical restatement of the advait or non-dualist metaphysics of Shankara was Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. Shankara's metaphysical monism is the archetype of Indian idealist philosophy, which rejects the duality of Brahman and atman and considers the material world illusory. Philosophical pluralism is propounded by the Sankhya school. The concern with the pluralist-philosophical system of ancient Indian thought is best represented in Surendra Nath Dasgupta's five-volume *History of Indian Philosophy*. A common thread running strongly through all these works, by and large, was the ubiquitous metaphysical assumption that Indian philosophy and thought were primarily religious and society-centered rather than being concerned with material life, political life, logic and epistemology.⁴ 2 Mahendra Prasad Singh It took longer for Orientalists, Indologists, and students of political thought to establish a new trail that showed that ancient Indian thought was as much preoccupied with theories of reliable knowledge about this world and theories of state and government as with metaphysics. The ancient Indian epistemological thought is brought to the fore in the pioneering researches of Tsherbatsky and Bimal Krishna Matilal.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore **Indian political thought** in post vedic era one of the fascinating areas of scholarly debates and discussions in contemporary India.

Political theories of origin of state

A similar new window opened when the political theories of origin of state in the Vedic and Buddhist texts and the treatises of Kautilya, Manu, Kamandaka and others were brought to light by textual scholars and historians, increasingly in combination with archeology and epigraphy.⁶ The Kautilya Text Legend has it that Kautilya was a teacher in the famous ancient Indian university at Takshshila. He helped one of his students Chandragupta in dislodging the Nandas, the ruling dynasty of Magadh, and establishing the Maurya dynasty. The text of the Arthashastra is attributed to this teacher, who is also known as Chanakya and Vishnugupta. A new English translation of the Arthashastra has recently become available. L. N. Rangarajan's translation follows in the trail of R. Shamasastri's and R. P. Kangle's.⁸ Shamasastri had discovered the text from a pandit in Tanjore in 1904, translated it into English first and published it in 1915. Kangle later critically edited and numbered the sutras, translated them, added his commentary, and published the outcome in three volumes between 1960 and 1965.

Rangarajan has attempted a new translation and reorganized the chapters in the original text into what he considers a more reader-friendly version. He goes on to say that 'presently available translations suffer from archaic expressions, voluminous footnotes, incomprehensible literalness, muddling of the text with tedious facts, difficulty in understanding a topic scattered in different places, divergence of opinion and personal prejudices or predilections'.⁹ The subjects dealt with prominently are: constituent elements of the state, major departments of the government, taxation system, armed forces and network of spies and the theory of rajamandala and foreign policy. A series of interpretative inferences can be made here. The first would be about the structure of the text itself. As the Arthashastra itself candidly admits, the text generally attributed to Kautilya is not the first in the tradition of the arthashastra, as distinguished from the tradition of dharmashastra. However, only the Kautilyan text has survived and was discovered early in the 20th century. Moreover, even in the case of the Kautilyan version, there are two different points of view as to whether it was 'created' or 'compiled' as a file by a series of scholars at different or the same point of time.¹⁰ The dating of the Arthashastra is the subject of a great deal of controversy. The range of possible dates places the text at times in the Mauryan and at others in the Gupta period. According to Romila Thapar, the text was originally written by Kautilya, the minister of Chandragupta Maurya (c. 322–298 BC) but it was commented and added on to by various later writers until about the third or fourth century AD.¹¹ T. R. Trautmann seeks to establish through the syntax and grammatical structures used in different chapters of the text that they must have been Kautilya's authored by different people and/or in different periods.¹² Kangle, who does not reject this argument out of hand, concedes that 'composition of a text has different connotations in ancient India, with the persistent tradition of oral transmission, from what it means in modern times'.

Yet as a student of political ideas and institutions, I find it more consistent with the legend, literature and historical interpretation now prevalent. It could not have belonged to an earlier period when Vedic and post-Vedic poetic and metaphysical speculations were profound but political ideas and institutions were singularly simpler, localized, and less clearly demarcated from social formations and organizations. Like the 'frontier' in American and Canadian history, there have also and always been frontiers of the Himalayas and the aranyakas (forests) of mind

and space in Indian life, letters, and imagination. The Arthashastra could not have belonged to a period later than that suggested by the great political transition from the Nandas to the Mauryas too.

Arthashastra bureaucratically centralized

The Arthashastra sits uncomfortably with the temper and texts of the post-Mauryan phase, when the forms of states, with the possible exception of the Gupta state, were less bureaucratically centralized. The weakened central state(s) then took frequent recourse to land grants to Brahmins (presumably for ideological domination) and samantas (feudal lords), a practice not unknown earlier, but very limited and infrequent. This resulted in fragmentation of sovereignty to feudal classes and communities, especially in peripheral areas. This continued through the early and later medieval Indian history and in an attenuated and regionally limited way even during the British Raj. A frontal attack on feudal institutions and mentality had to await the social reform movements of the elite and the subaltern classes and communities at the turn of the 19th century, and post-independence land reforms and the 'silent revolution' of the political rise of the lower classes, dalits and the tribal communities through electoral politics and public policies of the state in India.

As for the centralist versus decentralist debate over the Arthashastra, the protagonists of the former point of view can be said to be, speaking metaphorically, silently subscribing to the subsuming of Kautilya to the Kshatriya's possessive motif, and the latter to the brahmanical renunciatory motif. Find it more persuasive to agree with those who argue that rather than being an incumbent prime minister, Kautilya may have been a kingmaker in the Gandhi–JP tradition of politics of renunciation in democratic India, and Sonia Gandhi emulating the same in federal India today. The freedom with which the Arthashastra offers advice to all kinds of kings, strong Kautilya 15 and weak, lend it an authority or legitimization that is wider and detached from any purohit and the prime minister in office, the two functionaries that are stipulated by the Sanskrit text to be present by the sides of the monarch at the time of consultation with any minister. None of the Pali royal edicts of Ashokan rock and pillar inscriptions mention these super-ordinates, apparently next only to the king. But do not pay too much heed to that. Authority and legitimation in the brahmanical tradition is more ideological than coercive any way. Finally, while the general consensus among scholars has been that the theory of rajamandala is situated in the Indian subcontinent, yet a wider applicability of the model beyond this region may not be far-fetched. Dikshitar⁵³ in fact finds theoretical evidence for it right in the text. In the present age of democratization, federalization and globalization, the theory of rajamandala has the potential of being transplanted into what may be called 'vayaparamandala', both regional and global. The Social Structure We could make some inferences about the structure of the society, economy, and the state that are consistent with the factual details provided in the text. The structure of the society that emerges is one based on the varnashrama system. The varna system refers to the four orders into which society was ideally divided, and the ashrama system refers to the four phases of a life-cycle viz. brahamcharya (the celibate learner), grihasthya (the house-holder), vanaspratha (the anchorite), and sanyasa (the renouncer). The society was divided into four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya, and Sudras. There were two kinds of Brahmins or the priestly class: srotriya and Brahmins in general. The special function of the Brahmins was the performance of ceremonial

and sacred rituals. They, especially the srotriyas, enjoyed special privilege in social relations, property ownership, and laws.

Concept of Order

The srotriyas ranked next only to the temple establishment, hermits, and heretic ascetics. Purohita, the royal chaplain and adviser, enjoyed a position secondary to the royal family but exercised a good deal of influence on the king. In settling virgin territories, srotriyas were given tax-free land which could be transformed into hereditary property. Debt to a srotriya was treated second only to sovereign debt. Brahmins could bear arms as well but they were not supposed to be overtly martial in temperament and war. Kshatriyas were regarded as the 'protectors of the land'. Nobility of birth and royal lineage were considered matters of overriding importance. Only a male heir could succeed a king, though the rule of primogeniture was not a settled convention. Kshatriyas were valued as the best recruits to the army as compared to other varnas. Vaishyas as a varna are seldom mentioned in the text. But traders and merchants were an important and mobile segment of the society. Brahmins and Kshatriyas were apparently more equal than others, for Vaishyas are singled out in the text in the context of differential punishment. But they were also wealthy, for they feature in the section on laws of inheritance as well. They were apparently so ubiquitous that secret agents often disguised as traders. Sudras were agriculturalists, artisans, craftsmen, and actors and entertainers.

A Sudra was also an Aryan and could never be taken as a slave. They, like the Vaishyas, formed a large section of society and usually lived in uninhabited areas. Both Vaishyas and Sudras were also recruited in large numbers in the army. However, Kshatriyas were highly regarded as the best soldiers. Women were supposed to be always subject to patriarchal control by father, husband, or son. Non-Aryans were outside the pale of the four varnas. Their numerical strength is not clear though they were apparently not immune from slavery. The most frequently mentioned non-Aryans are called chandals who were probably 'untouchable' in their relation to an Aryan woman. Historians of ancient India are unanimous in their assessment that unlike the ancient Greek society, slavery was almost nonexistent in ancient India. This is borne out by the Arthashastra, which refers to Vrishalas and Pashandas who were non-Aryan ascetics belonging to the Sramana (non-brahmanical) sects. 4 Mahendra Prasad Singh The Arthashastra also refers to the 'unsubdued jungle tribes [who] live in their own territory, [and who] are more numerous, brave, fight in day light and, with their ability to seize and destroy countries, behave like kings' (8.1. 41-43). Rangarajan's surmise is: 'on the whole, tribal chieftains seem to have been independent of the kings so long as they did not harass the country and came to king's help when called upon to do so'.¹⁴ The jungle tribes were obviously outside the pale of the varna system at the time of the Arthashastra.

Occupations and professions listed in the Arthashastra are numerous and it mentions over 120 of these. They were mainly from agriculture, fisheries, animal husbandry, manufacturing based on arts and crafts, food products and vending, forestry, white-collar workers, defence services, textiles, jewelry, etc. The Kautilyan text also refers to foreigners (baharikas, agantuh, agantukah), although Rangarajan adds that some of 'these terms may refer to

strangers to the locality rather than true foreigners'. The text also has three references to ports and ferries (2.28) and sea-faring vessels. Foreign traders could visit these only if they were frequent visitors or vouchsafed by local merchants. Movements within the country, especially into the countryside and new settlements were regulated by passports and immigration rules. The entry into the fortified city was rigorously controlled by regulator officers and secret agents. The Economy The structure of the economy as revealed in the text appears to be considerably developed with regard to terms of ownership of property and division of labour. The institution of private property existed and so did state-ownership. This flies in the face of the Orientalist theories such as, for example, the Asiatic mode of production a la Karl Marx and oriental despotism a la Karl Wittfogel. Both these theories are premised on the absence of the institution of private property and royal absolutism. The state claimed ownership of common resources such as water and all residual, abandoned or disputed but unsettled private claims to property. Birds, fishes, vegetables on waterworks, irrespective of whether built by the state or private parties belonged to the state. The state also appropriated all treasure troves in the excess of 100,000 panas (the unit of money, from Sanskrit parnas) and 5/6th of smaller troves. The king is advised to maintain a diversified economy efficiently and profitably. Silver coins of one, half quarter, and one-eighth pana and copper coins of one mashaka, half a mashaka, one kakani and half a kakani were in circulation. Land, livestock, mining and fishing were all both in state and private ownership. Virgin land tracts were state-owned but arable land was cultivated both by the state and the private parties. However, state monopolies existed in gold, silver and gems, liquors, gambling. The state and local and foreign merchants were involved in trade and commerce. Multiple sources of revenue are indicated in the text: from the durgam (fortified towns), from the rashtram (the countryside), from khani (mines), setu (irrigation work), from ayamukham (accounting), from warehouses, saving from expenditure, from ayudhiyam (supply of soldiers in lieu of tax barter, confiscation) and so on. The rates of tariff schedules is also given in the text.

State and government

Kautilya One gets the impression from the text that the economy was predominantly agrarian. The crown lands (sita) were either cultivated directly under the administration of chief superintendent of crown land or let out to share-croppers at the rate of 1/4th or 1/5th of the harvest going to the tiller if they invested only on labour and one-half if they contributed all inputs. Private cultivators were under obligation not to keep their land fallow and pay land revenue at the rate of 1/6th of the produce. Animal husbandry was the second most important activity, and trade was 'the third pillar of economic activity'.¹⁶ **The Saptang Theory of State** The pre-Kautilyan theory of state in ancient India closely resembled the early states in great many tribal or lineage-based societies where the role of the state was proposed to uphold the varnashram laws, i.e., laws of society given by customs and traditions. It is similar in some sense to the early laissez fair state in mercantile economies of Europe in the early stages of commercial and industrial revolution, where a minimalist state only facilitated commerce and contract rather than actively intervened in the economy. Kautilya's Arthashastra made a significant break with this tradition by stipulating that the state could make its own laws and that in case of conflict between the laws of the dharmashastras and the dharmanaya of the state, the latter would prevail.¹⁷ True to the arthashastra tradition, the Arthashastra

does not concern itself so much with the social customs and laws as with secular economic activity and the structure of the state and government. As the saptang (seven-organ) theory of state suggests, the state was a corporate entity comprising (1) swami (king), (2) amatya (ministers and other high officials); (3) janpada/rashtra (territory and the population inhabiting these), (4) durga (fortified town and cities), (5) kosa (treasury), (6) danda (forces), and (7) mitra (allies). This is in the order of the seven constituents of the state presented in the Arthashastra. They are supposed to be organically interdependent and interlinked according to Kautilya.

The argument we find here is that earlier authorities cited by Kautilya opined that a calamity befalling a constituent higher in the order is more detrimental to the state than the lower one, but Kautilya shrewdly disagrees and ends up arguing that each element is equally important and indispensable. But, he admits reminiscent of ancient Greek teleologists and modern functionalists, 'that partial calamity of one element is more likely to be functionally substituted by more healthy elements than a simultaneously debilitating calamity affecting more than one part of the state.' But '[lastly,] a calamity which threatens to destroy all other elements shall be considered as [the most] serious, irrespective of what position the element affected occupies in the list of priorities' (Arthashastra, 8.1.63/Rangarajan, 1992:127).¹⁸ Departments of Government Agriculture appears to be the most important economic activity of the time, and yet other economic activities were also considerably developed. In verse 2.12.37 the Arthashastra says: Mahendra Prasad Singh 'The source of the financial strength of the state is the mining [and metallurgical] industry; the state exercises power because of its treasury. With [increased] wealth and a [powerful] army more territory can be acquired thereby further increasing the wealth of the state'.¹⁹ The Kautilyan state demonstrated a considerably high degree of functional specialization and structural differentiation. It mentions 34 different departments of government, their respective adhyakshas (heads) and their qualifications and duties.

They are as follows as per Rangarajan's (1992) summary:

1. Samahartri/Samnidhatri—Chief Controller of Accounts
 2. Akshapatalamadhyaksha/Nagavanadhyaksha³Chief Elephant Forester
 3. Koshadhyaksha—Chief Superintendent of Treasury
 4. Akaradhyaksha—Chief Controller of Mining and Metallurgy
 5. Lohadhyaksha—Chief Superintendent of Metals
 6. Lakshanadhyaksha—Chief Superintendent of Mint
 7. Khanadhyaksha—Chief Superintendent of Mines
 8. Lavanadhyaksha—Chief Salt Commissioner
 9. Suvarnadhyaksha³Chief Superintendent of Precious Metals and Jewellery
- These were the top echelons of the ministerial or administrative hierarchies of the central state.

Ministry in Arthashastra

The distinction between the two categories, ministers and officials, is not very clear in the text, nor is the division between the central and provincial administration self-evident. The only vertical administrative hierarchies clearly mentioned appear to be those for the village and city/ town level, including fortified cities. The administrative structure outlined above is by and large horizontal; the vertical chain of command and responsibilities is mostly left unarticulated. Only in few instances do the readers get a glimpse of explicit or implied hierarchical control, supervision, and coordination. However Rangarajan (1992: 308) makes bold to assert: '[T]here were at least two grades of ministers and head of the departments, apart from the councilors who need not have had direct administrative responsibilities. ... Kautilya says that one who fails all four tests (dharma, artha, karma and fear) shall be sent to difficult posts such as forests, mines or factories. Hence the salary of the head of the department could have been anywhere between 1000 to 12,000 panas per annum, with or without perquisites'. Romila Thapar reads into the Kautilyan text the reference to ministers as well as council of ministers ('mantrino-mantriparishadamcha')²⁰. It goes without saying that the monarch himself occupied the apex of ministerial and/or bureaucratic hierarchy(ies).

Conclusion

The history of political ideas regarding states in ancient India also shows a similar line of evolution: the ideal kings Rama and Yudhishtir in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata culminate into the theory of saptang state and rajamandala in Arthashastra. The continuing relevance of Kautilyan models is underlined by my comparison between Kautilya and Waltz above. This is further underlined by texts like the Kamandaka Nitisar, separated almost by a millennium from the Arthashastra and discovered probably in East Asia.⁴⁷ It draws heavily on the previous text and in the opinion of Kulke and Rothermund: 'The relevance of the Arthashastra for medieval Indian polity is that the coexistence of various smaller rivaling kingdoms was much more typical for most periods of Indian history than the rather exceptional phase when one great empire completely dominated the political scene'.

Read with Dikshitar (1932), the theory of rajamandala may have a universal applicability. 14 Mahendra Prasad Singh Conclusion A glance at the wider corpus of the textual tradition of ancient India from the evolutionary perspective would suggest an interesting line of development that seems to be along these lines: We see the philosophical and social visions of Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist thought ranging from monism to dualism to pluralism, on the one side, and concern with the theoretical and practical problems of the political community that gradually transited from tribal republican and confederal states to monarchical bureaucratic states of the Nandas and Mauryas of Magadha, on the other. Subsequently, after its decline there emerge the states of later and ancient and early medieval Indian history, first characterized by Marxist historians of India as feudal, a view more generally accepted later. To which phase of this evolutionary—I hesitate to use the word historical here—narrative could the Kautilyan Arthashastra have belonged" The most probable phase would appear to be the period of the

replacement of the Magadhan state of the Nandas by the Magadhan state of the Mauryas. We lack clinching literary, historical and/or archaeological evidence for this inference.

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41. Bohman, James F.; Rehg, William (1997). *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. MIT Press. ISBN 978-0-262-52241-0.
42. Barzilai, Gad (2003). *Communities and Law: Politics and Cultures of Legal Identities*. The University of Michigan Press. ISBN 978-0-47211315-6.
43. Gutmann, Amy; Thompson, Dennis F. (1996). *Democracy and Disagreement*. Harvard University Press. ISBN 978-0-674-19766-4.
44. Gutmann, Amy; Thompson, Dennis (2004). *Why Deliberative Democracy?*. Princeton University Press. ISBN 978-0-691-12014-5.
45. London Philosophy Study Guide offers many suggestions on what to read, depending on the student's familiarity with the subject: *Political Philosophy*