

The Arthashastra as a Text of Pragmatic Realism: A Literary-Theoretical Examination of Power, Ethics, and Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT: This research treats Kautilya's Arthashastra as a work of pragmatic realism, not only in the political sphere but also in the realm of literary criticism. It is traditionally seen as a political manual, but this research goes well beyond that orthodoxy. It investigates the text's rhetorical strategies, its narrative structure, and the overarching philosophical themes through which Kautilya attempts to persuade his audience. It focuses on how Kautilya uses language and allegory and what kind of ethical discourse he engages in to produce a narrative of power and control that gives him entrance into the political sphere. It interprets the text's strategies and tactics, as well as their implications and ramifications, through the prism of modern literary theory. They range from Foucault's comments about power and its discourse to Marxist criticism and post-colonial perspectives. Indeed, the Arthashastra might just as well be regarded as a complex text that intersects literature, philosophy, and politics.

KEYWORDS: Arthashastra, Kautilya, pragmatic realism, rhetoric, power, ethics, literary theory, Foucault, discourse, political philosophy, allegory, Machiavelli, realpolitik, classical Indian literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ascribed to Kautilya (or Chanakya), the ancient Indian sage, the Arthashastra stands as a landmark in the history of political philosophy and statecraft. This treatise from the 4th century BC has not only formed the backbone of discourse on power and governance in ancient India but has also significantly influenced contemporary debates on realism. Indeed, Arthashastra's materialist, pragmatic insights into human nature, moral exigencies, and the "real" demands of governance have led many scholars and political philosophers to consider this ancient text as a premodern example of Machiavellian statecraft. This paper, however, does more than locate the Arthashastra within the conversation around "realist" political theory. Using a lens of political pragmatism, it pays close attention to the intricacies of power, ethics, and rhetoric at work in Kautilya's text. A. I. Dar observes:

The subject matter of Arthashastra precisely earns him the title of 'first great political realist' because much of the bedrock assumptions of realism that Europe came to know very late, Kautilya had in ancient India grasped them.⁽¹⁾ My claim here is that Kautilya's articulation of power dynamics is not merely an instrumental analysis but is deeply rooted in an analytical framework with a certain ethic. Kautilya does not condemn ruling as an immoral activity but proffers a ruling ethic that enables the ruler to achieve the ends of state authority and, ultimately, the state itself. This study uses contemporary academic interpretations of realism to connect with Kautilya's insights and present-day political theories. It seeks to place the Arthashastra within a richer intellectual tradition to draw out its salience, and in doing so, it simultaneously and serendipitously revisits the text with fundamentally provocative questions that have long remained tied to its identity and that continue to rise and fall in our modern political life.

II. RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AND LITERARY DEVICES IN THE ARTHASHASTRA

Rhetoric of Pragmatism and Power : The Arthashastra has one main thrust: It teaches the ruler how to rule. It does this by emphasizing, in some detail, the arts of governance. The most striking of these is the enforcement of laws, which Kautilya claims is almost entirely the ruler's prerogative. Yet in ruling the state and enforcing the laws, the ruler is also enjoined to maintain and increase the power, security, and wealth of the state. Kautilya consequently counsels in directions that are sometimes morally skeptical and even downright sinister, for maintaining and increasing the power and security and the wealth of the state. He considers the ruler a concentrated bundle of all the affairs of state, and so Kautilya instructs on all these grounds—the ruler's personal strength and power, the strength and power of the utterly obedient law, the utter security and complete

wealth of the state. Power, control, and survival are the recurring subjects of the Arthashastra. They are presented plainly and without adornment, leaving no room for dissenting opinions. The work's rhetorical force lies in the presentation of morally complex ideas as simple, pragmatic truths. These ideas are pushed on the reader (or ruler) until they yield a realpolitik worldview. This is rhetoric at its best—Machiavelli could hardly have done it better. Ananya Behera observes:

Kautilya's monarch was a **rajarishi**, a wise ruler, whose mission was to pull people out of poverty, in contrast to Machiavelli's prince, who was more like an immovable robber. The king was a devoted servant of his subjects, according to Kautilya. Only a **rajarishi**, in Kautilya's opinion, could adopt an ethical and people-centred philosophy.(17)

Symbolism and Allegory in Statecraft : The Arthashastra is mainly edifying, yet it uses symbolism and allegory to express the moral and ethical problems of rulership. One potent aspect of this allegorical work is the mandala concept. This graphic representation of concentric circles illustrates the different relationships a state has with its immediate neighbors, which are portrayed in three ways: as either enemies, allies, or "friendly neutrals." Conversely, the mandala not only depicts a state's immediate interactions with its nearest neighbors but also forms a spatial and temporal representation for understanding the nature of any state's human interactions at any point in history. In addition, the text can be read for its allegorical depiction of the ruler's behavior. The depiction of the ruler as lion or predator serves well as a metaphor for the survival of any regime. The ruler—or regime—must dominate its political environment, just as a lion or any top predator must dominate its own environment to survive. Regimes, like top predators, are always on the lookout for usurpers; they must maintain their edge against the even mildest contenders for the crown.

Tone and Style : The ancient Indian classic Arthashastra is a manual on statecraft and military strategy. It instructs rulers and advises them on what they must do and how they must behave in order to govern properly. Rulership has always involved a certain amount of artistry—as well as audacity—that makes governance a somewhat occult practice. Kautilya's work acknowledges this aspect of governance. Both its style and substance allow it to perform an act of incitement, delivering both a command and an encouragement to the ruler to undertake the not very longed-for and often clandestine business of governance. The style of the Arthashastra mirrors its philosophical pragmatism. With its focused, unembellished prose, the text itself seems to urge its readers to get on with the business of ruling and to refrain from getting lost in the artistic or rhetorical flourishes found in many other ancient texts. Speculation and idealism are no substitutes for power that works. Ruling well requires efficiency, a careful reckoning of costs and benefits, and a disposition that does not get diverted by sentimentality.

III. THEMATIC EXPLORATION: POWER, ETHICS, AND REALISM

Pragmatic Realism and Power Dynamics : The thread that runs through the Arthashastra is about power—how to get it and how to keep it. Kautilya makes it clear that when we talk about politics, we're fundamentally talking about power, and he puts forth this idea as the most basic, unadorned aspect of political life. What rulers in an anarchic world must do with this power—when and how they must use it, and what means they can and cannot use—is certainly the text's main concern. Unlike many political philosophers, ancient and modern, who have thought and written on the subject, Kautilya's Arthashastra does not hedge about using force and deceit when necessary. The modern theory of realism in international relations seems to find its antecedent in the ancient Indian text, the Arthashastra. Realism is a theory that explains international relations in a certain way. It assumes that the state is the fundamental actor in international politics and that the main goal of the state is to pursue power and maintain its security. If a textual antecedent were necessary to explain the ideas of Hans Morgenthau, a leading figure in the development of the modern realist theory, one might look to the Arthashastra for their source.

Ethical Pragmatism vs. Idealism : One can understand the ethical standpoint of the Arthashastra through the lens of literary theory, particularly that of ethical criticism. It is not so much a text that attempts to persuade the reader to adopt a certain moral viewpoint as one that presents a series of judgments and pronouncements about the kinds of actions and policies that are deserving of praise or blame. These judgments and pronouncements are aligned with a set of values that are uninterruptedly instrumental. In Kautilya's view, what is morally right and what is politically expedient are not so very different; both kinds of prescriptions serve the ruler's as well as the state's purposes.

Viewing this from an angle of literature, one might read the ethical manipulation as a creative device that generates the rub between the public persona of the king and the private, often dark, aspects of his rule. The king in the Arthashastra must reconcile and creatively navigate the path between high morality and the low, often nasty, necessities of governance—narrative tension that is at the heart of this story. Also, the king's ethical flexibility reflects an old literary device known as the unreliable narrator, where the surface appearance of right and wrong is called into question.

Power, Discourse, and Control (Foucault's Theory) : The frameworks Michel Foucault provides in his theories of power and discourse are useful for analyzing the Arthashastra. Foucault posits that power is not just something that is exerted upon people through force or violence but is also embedded and expressed within the discourse that people use to understand and make sense of the world and their place in it. The Arthashastra certainly operates as a discourse of power; it tells the ruler how to rule and, more important, how to maintain the kinds of rhetorical control that will ensure his authority is both virtually and visibly expressed. Foucault's "discourse analysis critically examines how language constructs reality and influences power relations. (Lenghart). Kautilya's focus on covert operations, media manipulation, and psychological warfare does not just emerge from an ancient Indian context; it aligns quite nicely with some contemporary understandings of how power operates. In the West, we often refer to this operation of power in terms of "biopolitics," the way governing bodies mold public perception and behavior in order to rule over them more effectively. Both bodies of work—Kautilya's and Foucault's—offer thoughtful perspectives on how and why perception management is key to maintaining order.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparison with Machiavelli's *The Prince* : Many of the themes and much of the rhetoric in the Arthashastra parallel those found in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, especially the latter's pragmatic approach to ethics and power. Both texts counsel rulers to disregard traditional morals and instead act for the sake of their state's survival and flourishing—that is, their profit and power. But while Machiavelli's work might be seen as a narrow and immediate response to the chaotic political scene of Renaissance Italy, Kautilya's Arthashastra arises from a much broader vision of statecraft that encompasses not just governance but also the interrelated realms of economics, law, and warfare. Both of these texts also use direct, prescriptive language as a common rhetorical strategy. Kautilya and Machiavelli both write with a tone that is not just instructive but almost stern—their advice is framed as something that's not just useful but essential for ruling success. In this way, they reinforce the realist philosophy underpinning their works, where "it is better to be feared than loved" and where the ends often justify dubious means.

Comparing with Classical Indian Texts : Attributed to Kautilya (Chanakya), the "Arthashastra" shares some literary values with classical Indian texts such as the "Bhagavad Gita," the "Mahabharata," and the "Ramayana." Yet, it presents some unique qualities that set it apart. While these other texts follow narrative forms that explore philosophical and moral quandaries through characterization and storytelling, the "Arthashastra" is more akin to the classical Greek text "The Republic." Both texts are methodically structured, but the "Arthashastra" lays out its arguments in a power-dynamic, statecraft-focused manner that is praiseworthy for its clarity and didacticism, using analogies and aphorisms to communicate practical political insights. The theory of the mandala is one of the most excellent ideas in Arthashastra. This inter-state relations theory hypothesises that a state is an ally or hostile, depending on its geographical position vis-a-vis the others. Kautilya extensively discussed the idea with the examples of *Manusmriti* and *Mahabharata*. (GeoStrata) The central theme concerns the real exercise of power—not the power in the ideal polity or at the ideal time, but a power that must often be exercised in the face of adversity and must be kept above water when waves of discontent rise. Kautilya's work focuses on the ideal ruler rather than the ideal realm and views the "functional" polity as superior, with stability as its chief beneficent quality. This valuation directly counters the morality of ruling for the common good that the "Bhagavad Gita" and others project. Yet in its own way, the "Arthashastra" itself is also a morality treatise; Kautilya also has his own valuation of right and wrong.

This study underscores that the Arthashastra can very well be understood from the point of view of literary theory—and even should be, as it offers new vistas of interpretation with regard to its largely unappreciated rhetorical strategies and unfathomable thematic depth. Employing modern literary theories—such as Foucault's discourse analysis and Marxist criticism—our interpretive community of scholars has yet to really engage the text in a manner that fully appreciates its nuanced, if not convoluted, approach to power and control, as well as its manipulation of ethical norms to serve political ends.

A comparative study of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and other classic Indian texts reveals that Kautilya, like Machiavelli, makes power the central theme of his discourse. However, Kautilya's manner of discussing power is unique; he is even more grotesquely amoral in his philosophy than Machiavelli. Power is the only value, Kautilya seems to say. There is no way to achieve it that is wrong; anything that leads to power is right. There is no reconciliation of power with morality; in fact, there is no even half-hearted attempt to do so.

V. CONCLUSION

For too long, the Western political tradition has seen itself as the sole arbiter of governance principles. This article goes against that grain by using the ancient Indian text, the Arthashastra, as a key work that provides profound insights on statecraft not just from a political science perspective, but also from a literary-critical standpoint. The author, Kautilya, employs pathos, ethos, and rhetoric to impart his governance strategies to readers. Both disciplines can benefit from the study of this text. This research emphasizes that ancient texts, such as the Arthashastra, are still highly significant in today's "globalized society" when discussing power, governance, and basis of rule. The discussions around these ancient texts, and the power dynamics they contain, merit a place within literary studies for our contemporary society. The reason for dedicating a place to these ancient texts in our form of literary studies is simple: We live in a highly globalized world, yet we still predominantly frame our international discussions and decision-making in part through the governance and political models derived from Western classics. The study paves the way for additional research. One likely possibility is to conduct a more thorough study comparing the Arthashastra with other ancient political texts, such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* or Confucian governance texts. Another possible direction is to see what kinds of interpretations might arise if we apply postcolonial theory to the Arthashastra. Power, statecraft, and governance certainly have relevance to the kinds of things that concern us postcolonial societies and their critics. Also, the next step for research could be to investigate how the ethical pragmatism of the Arthashastra might align with contemporary political situations, like the ethics of espionage and state surveillance or realpolitik in international relations. Connecting ancient political philosophy with our present-day globalized world could help scholars extract from Kautilya's work an enduring relevance that the Arthashastra might serve in today's society.

Thus, "Arthashastra" is a crucial work that intricately weaves together political theory and the crafts of literary articulation. It is remarkable for its realism (even when viewed from the present), its rhetorical strategies, and its ethically flexible guidance to leaders on power and the means appropriate to achieving and ensuring it. These attributes make the "Arthashastra" not only a profound meditation on the nature of governance and the human beings who inhabit it, but also a significant ancient text from which to extract political meanings and consider present-day "relevance." In short, we can read the "Arthashastra" for its political as well as for its literary insights. A national seminar on the relevance of Arthashastra at Indian Institute of Advance studies, Shimla concluded thus:

The importance of the ideas and the ways of thinking that the Arthashastra reveals is useful because in many ways the present world is similar to the world that Kautilya worked and built the Mauryan Empire to its greatness. Kautilya's Arthashastra was pitched to teach with the various intricacies of governance and politics to the ruler. The text also reveals ideas of a 'welfare state', in which the state controlled and contributed to all aspects of daily life, ensuring equality and fairness in distribution of the resources, benefits and wealth. Kautilya's premise was that it was in the ruler's self-interest to be generous to the people, provide employment, build roads, harbours and parks and to address the grievances of the people promptly. ("Reflections of Arthashastra and Its Relevance in the 21st Century – Indian Institute of Advanced Study)

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