



Dharma and politics: A critique of the Kautilīya Arthaśāstra

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Abstract: Vedic and epic India admits dharma (righteous conduct) as first among the four goals of human life (*Puruṣārtha catuṣṭaya* : dharma, artha, kāma, mokṣa). The Kautilīya Arthaśāstra admits only the first three goals (*trivarga*, the triad) with supreme position to artha (material prosperity). However, all the units in the triad remained complementary to each other and no royal edict was issued without the sanction of dharma. In the context of the controversy in scriptural validity royal edict (*rājājñā*) superseded dharma and ruled supreme. This paper attempts to prove how dharma, which also connotes svadharma, remained complementary to politics (*rajanīti*) and helped shaping the social order during Kautilian age for good governance.

Key words: Kautilīya Arthaśāstra, Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Vṛtti, Vārtā, Politics.

I. Introduction: Trivarga- Meaning and Scope

The Kautilya Arthashastra is “the science of politics” (KA, 1.1.1 & 1.4.3) deals with the art of governance in its widest sense. Administration was run by eighteen dignitaries known as *tūrthas* (KA, 1.12.6 & 1.12.20). subsequently they are referred to as *mahāmātras* (KA, 1.13.1) in the text. They were known as *mantrin* (the councillor), *purohita* (the chaplain), *senāpati* (the commander-in-chief), *yuvarāja* (the crown-prince), *dauvārika* (the chief palace usher), *antarvaśika* (chief of the palace guards), *praśāstrī* (the director), *samāhartṛ* (the administrator), *saṁnidhātṛ* (the director of stores), *pradeśtrī* (the magistrate), *nāyaka* (the commandant), *pauravyāvahārika* (the city judge), *kārmāntika* (the director of factories), *mantriparisad* (the council of ministers), *adhyakṣa* (the superintendent), *dandapāla* (the chief of the army staff), *durgapāla* (the commandant of the fort), *antapāla* (the commandant of the frontier fort), *āṭakika* (the forest chieftain) in his own territory. (Kangle, II.24-25). Foremost among them are the *mantrin* (councillor), the *purohita* (chaplain), the *senāpati* (commander-in-chief) and the *yuvarāja* (crown-prince). The *mahāmātras* dealt with all the aspects of Indian polity like administration, rights and duties, taxation, revenue, foreign policy, defence and war which were governed by the concept of *dharma*. Vedic and epic India considers *dharma* as first among the four *Puruṣārthas* which signify human efforts (*puruṣākāra*) as well as any object of human pursuit. Out of four *arthas* (goals) of man (*puruṣārtha catuṣṭaya*- *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, *mokṣa*) *dharma* comes first and it helps to pursue the other *puruṣārthas* like *artha* and *kāma* meaningfully. Prior to Kautilīya Arthaśāstra (K A), the *Mahābhārata*, 3.150.28 posits that *dharma* has its origin in good practices and it is the foundation of the Vedic wisdom – *ācārasambhavo dharmo dharme vedāḥ pratiṣṭhitaḥ*. It enjoys a distinguished place in the triad as it supersedes both *artha* and *kāma* in merit in ensuring joy to the righteous person (*dharmātmā*) in this world and here after it (*Mahābhārata*, 12.91.52). Further it is noted that *dharma* is the original source of *artha*, and *kāma* is the output of *artha* only. These three (the triad) have their roots in the will of man and the will relates to the material prosperity *dharmamūla sadeivārthaḥ kamorthaphalamucyate I saṁkalpamūlāste sarve saṁkalpo viṣyātmakaḥ II* (*Mahābhārata* 12.123.4). Kaṇāda (5th-6th century B.C.) in the *Vaiśeṣikasūtra*, 1.1.1 enumerates that *dharma* leads to an elevated state of well-being and liberation (*Chakravorty* 39). Prior to Kautilya the terms Arthashastra and Nītiśāstra are used as synonyms and were associated with the three aims of life (*trivarga*): *dharma* (performance of religious and customary duties), *artha* (useful acquisition and possession of property and gold), and *kāma* (enjoyment of sexual pleasure). The Kautilīya Arthaśāstra is said to be a collection of the earlier teachings of well known Arthaśāstras (KA, 1.1.1). It is a treatise on the science of politics for the acquisition and protection of earth. *Artha* stands for material well-being as well as the means of securing such well-being, especially wealth. It is also known as *Vṛtti* (livelihood) since essential conditions of human material prosperity is governed by his security of livelihood (KA, 15.1.1-2 : *manuṣyāṇām vṛttirarthaḥ, manuṣyāvātī bhūmīrityarthaḥ I tasyāḥ pṛthivyāḥ lābhapālanopāyāḥ śāstramarthaśāstramiti II*). The term *vārtā* derived from *vṛtti* signifies three fold economic activity of agriculture, cattle rearing, trade for the sustenance of human livelihood on earth (KA, 1.4.1: *kṛṣipāsupālye vānījyā ca vārtā*). Forest products and labour also enhance economy. By the strength of economics the king could use treasury and army to bring his own party as well as the party of the enemies under his sway. (KA.1.4.182). Kautilya deals only with the *trivarga* in this text which lays down provisions for security and

prosperity (*yoga-kṣema*) for his own people which is known by the technical term *tantra* (administration). His arrangement for keeping watch over the neighbouring states and their rulers is expressed by the term *āvāpa* (foreign affairs). In this way the first five books (*Adhikaraṇas*) known as *tantra* are divided into ninety four sub-sections (*Prakaraṇas*) and the other nine books, known as *āvāpa*, are divided into eighty four *Prakaraṇas*. The Fifteenth Book dealing with the plan of the work of thirty two methodological principles, remains outside the divisions of *tantra* and *āvāpa* (*Radhakrishna 452*). Kautilya believes *artha* (material well-being) to be supreme in the triad as *dharma* (spiritual good) and *kāma* (sexual pleasures) depend on the material well-being (*KA, I.7.6-7*). Besides, *dharma* is said to be the righteous conduct of the ruler and the ruled which keeps the state under the umbrella of good governance.

II. Objectives of Research

With the above scriptural notes of *dharma* in view, this paper intends to discuss its implications in shaping politics, political will, and wings of administration in a state. Whether social science of the time has been reflected through the term *dharma*? Whether the *Kautilya Arthaśāstra* uses this term for creating provisions for a theocratic state? When *artha* is supreme can *dharma* and *kāma* influence the nation-building force? The objective of this research is to answer these queries through textual interpretation and application of various cultural and linguistic norms.

III. Dharma and Social Order

The *Kautilya Arthaśāstra* admits that the knowledge of the *Vedas* and *Vedāṅgas* contributes towards determination of *dharma* (duties/righteous conduct) of different castes (*caturvarṇa*) and difference stages of life (*caturāśrama*). It follows Brāhminical religion, imparts instructions, and prescribes duties to all castes and stages of life (*Winternitz 615*). Such duties are known by the term *svadharmā*. The Brahmin with study and teaching performed prescribed rituals, officiated at the ritual of others and participated in giving and receiving gifts. The Kṣatriyas with study and prescribed rituals lived by the profession of arms and protected life and property of people. The vaiśyas with study and prescribed rituals adopted agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The sudras served the above three *varṇas* and continued other economic activities and adopted the profession of the artisan, actor, and singer. There was prescription of duty (*svadharmā*) for four stages of life – *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *grāhasthya* (householder), *vānaprastha* (forest recluse) and *parivrajaka* (wandering ascetic). The Brahmacari (the celibate) studied scriptures, practiced rituals, lived on alms and remained devoted to the teacher, teacher's son and to his fellow students. A *grhastha* (house holder) earned his livelihood by pursuing his own profession. He married a woman from the same *varṇa* (caste) having a different *gotra* (deriving from the same primo dial paternal ancestors) for progeny and propagation of his race. He worshipped gods, guests, ancestors and lived a life of sacrifice for the benefit of the family. The *vānaprasthas* (forest recluse), wearing deer-skin, observed celibacy and lived on the bare ground. He practiced rituals, worshiped gods, guests and ancestors and lived on the things gathered from the forest. The *parivrajaka* (a wandering ascetic) continued complete control over his senses, renounced sensual pleasures, left attachment to worldly life, maintained inner and outer purity and lived on charity. The duties common to all *varṇas* were *ahimsā* (abstaining from injury to all living beings), *satyam* (truthfulness), *śauca* (cleanliness), *anasūyā* (freedom from malice), *ānṛśamsyam* (compassion) and *kṣamā* (tolerance). It is said that the observation of *svadharmā* leads one to heaven and eternal bliss and its transgression leads to chaos and destruction. Therefore the ruler didn't allow people to swerve from it (*KA, 1.3.14-17* cf. *Rangarajan 84-85*). It discusses *dharma* in the contest of law governing various subjects of importance in administration. The conduct of marriages as per rules was known as *dharma-vivāha*. The ordinances with the rules of *dharma* encompassed inheritance, construction and sell of house, border dispute, land consolidation, loan system, donation, treatment with harsh words, harsh punishment etc. (*Prasad 170*). It played a major role in the matters of dispute. *Śruti*, *smṛti*, *nyāya*, *sadācāra* were the four sources of law prior to Kautilya and he admitted its implementation with four steps like *dharma*, *vyavahāra*, *caritra*, and *rājaśāsana*. The *Arthaśāstra*, 3.1.38-39 declares: "When all laws are perishing, the king here is the promulgator of laws, by virtue of his guarding the right conduct of the world consisting of four *varṇas* and four *āśramas*. A matter of dispute has four feet--law (*dharma*), transaction (*vyavahāra*), custom (*caritram*), and royal edict (*rājaśāsanam*) where the later one supersedes the earlier one effectively" (*Kangle, II. 194-195*). Out of the above four, law is based on truth (*satya*), a transaction on commonly accepted view of citizens, while the command of the king is the royal edict (*śāsanam*) (*Kangle, 3.1.40*). Though *dharma* occupied a very dignified position in the matters of administration still Kautilya does not accept it to over rule the royal edict (*rājājñā*). It is a means for administration and not the purpose of it. It plays a very important role in the context of maintaining social order. Keeping social justice in view the system of *caturvarṇa* (four castes) and *caturāśrama* (four stages of life) was strictly observed by administration. Whenever there was any controversy in the context of scriptural validity of various *dharmaśāstras* the order of the king (*rājājñā*) ruled supreme. The *Arthaśāstra*, 3.1.45 notes: *śāstram vipratipadyeta dharma nyāyena kenacit I nyāyastatra pramāṇam syāt tatra pātho hi naśyati II* "Where (a text of) the science may be in conflict with any edict in a matter of law, there the edict shall prevail; for, there the written text loses its validity" (*Kangle, 11.196*).

IV. Harmony of *Dharma* and *Artha* in the Political System

The king was the source of *dharma* and *nyāya* (justice) and was known as *dharma pravartaka* (the protector and propagator of *dharma*). The king enjoyed sensual pleasures (*kāma*) without contravening the spiritual good (*dharma*) and material well-being (*artha*) (KA, 1.7.3). The three goals of life even with the priority of *artha*, maintained harmony with each other. The view was that any one among the three if enjoyed excessively, harmed itself and the other two simultaneously (KA, 1.7.4-5). The *cāṅkyaśūtra*, also extends emphatical priority to *artha* in its aphorisms (1&2): *Dharma* is the root of happiness, and *artha* is the root of *dharma*: (1)*sukhasya mūlam dharmah*, (2)*dharmasya mūlam arthah*. In a later period Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* (c.4th century: A.D) dealt with *trivarga* (triad) giving priority to *kāma* and emphatically mentioned that *kāma* (sex) regulated by *dharma* and achieved through *artha* is the ideal situation: “*śārāsthiti hetvadāharadharmāṇo hi kāmāḥ I phalabhūtāśca dharmārthayoh*” (*Kāmasūtra*, 1.2.37). The principle of four castes and four stages of life *varṇāśramadharmā* was the political ideology and any idea of creation of a new state was not conceived without it. The *dharma* was in king's control that he appointed the priests and the priests remained devoted to the king. He had control over the temples, shrines, and other places of worship. One post of *devatādhyakṣa* was created to inspect the income of the temple for the deposit of the admissible amount to the royal treasury. Even though the king was considered above *dharma*, still the royal edict was given without whim and it followed the rules of *dharma*. Prof. Krishna Rao observes that Kautilya has given priority to conscience so that in administration the sanctions of *dharma* may not be considered heavenly mandate. It shows that common well-being was the source of his Rationalistic legalism. (Prasad 171).

In the observation of royal duty (*rājadharmā*) Kautilya adopted four *upāyas* or instruments of diplomacy like-*sāma* (conciliation) *dāna* (gifts) *daṇḍa* (force) and *bheda* (dissension) (KA,7.16.3). A king with a winning spree is advised to use any or all of the above means for achieving the end. The adoption of deception, seduction & hypocrisy with the use of various powders, poisons, *mantra* and *tantra* for the extermination of the enemy speaks of his amoral and unfair vision in politics. But most of the scholars agree that Kautilya has given priority to *dharma* since he has divided war into two categories like *dharma yuddha* and *Kūṭayuddha*. It is clearly stated that a king averse to *dharma* can never attain success of any kind. Keeping *dharma* (righteous conduct & human values) in view he laid down principles for dealing with a defeated king. In addition to message, understanding, and appeasement he admitted even camouflaging and hypocrisy to defeat the enemy. He believed that *nīti* (moral values) and *dharma* can never supersede the interest of the state. His principles of diplomacy admitted-(a) interstate relationship, (b) the king at the centre of interstate relationship, (c) growth and expansion of the kingdom and extermination of the enemy, (d) *śāḍgunyasiddhānta* or theory of six principles of the ruler (*sam̐dhi*, *vigraha*, *yāna*, *sam̐sraya*, *dhvaidhī bhāva*) while dealing with the other states; however *vigraha* (war) was considered the last resort, (e) equal importance to *dharma* (righteousness), *naitikatā* (morality), & *kālocitatā* (appropriateness of time) (Prasad 128-29). Above such principles appropriately stand by the ideals of a good ruler envisioned by the *Mahabhārata –purā iva piturgr̥he viṣaye yasya mānavah I nirbhayā vicariṣyanti sa rājā rājasattamah II* (*Mahabharata*,12.58.33) “He is the best of the kings in whose kingdom subjects move fearlessly like children in the house of their father”. Now it is observed that Kautilya's theory of diplomacy was not an end in itself, but it was the means to an end i.e. sovereignty of the state and protection of the people. This theory of diplomatic vision is meaningful even today.

V. Conclusion

The study of the *Kautilya Arthasāstra* shows that *dharma* and politics (*rājanīti*) remained inseparable from each other like two sides of a coin. Advocating priority for secular ideals both of them rolled with the motto of public well-being. *Dharma* was the means for the progress and prosperity of the state and was never an end in itself. It also connotes *svadharmā* or duties and righteous conduct within the social order of four castes and four stages of life observed by the citizens and implemented by the ruler. In this way *dharma* played no role for creating the provisions for a theocratic state. On the other hand it shaped politics, political will, good governance and reflected the social science of the day. Thus, in the context of social justice Kautilya was more generous and liberal than the social thinkers of the modern times. Now a days when social fabrics in different parts of the globe are rent by religious fundamentalism, the humanity can rely on the secular ideals of Kautilya for living a social life of peace and prosperity.

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