

An Analysis of Kautilya's Administrative Thought

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ABSTRACT

India had developed complex systems of Public Administration centuries before Europe became civilized. Kautilya wrote Arthshashtara (Science of Politics), world's most complete work on the art and science of government, written during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya who ruled India between 319 and 296 BC. Kautilya is by far the foremost Indian administrative philosopher and in quality and approach, he is among the world's half dozen administrative seers. The present paper analyses the administrative thought of Kautilya and its relevance in contemporary India.

Keywords: Kautilya, Arthshashtara, Administration, Public Administration.

INTRODUCTION

Arthsastra, Kautilya's magnum opium, is India's oldest and complete text on Public Administration. It deals with the functions of the chief executive, hierarchy, bureaucracy, corruption, geographical division of the state, field administration headed by an all-purpose coordinating district overload, supervisory management, motivation, morale and job description. Arthsastra comprises of 15 Chapters of which the first five deals with Public Administration, the rest eight with relations with neighbors (international relations). The last two chapters are miscellaneous.¹

CONCEPT OF STATE

Arthsastra deals with the political, social and economic management of the state, covering almost all aspects of government, both in theory and practice. The range of discussion includes the duties of King, his ministers, his councilors and council meetings, departments of government, diplomacy, war and peace. He talks about trade and commerce, law courts, taxation and revenue, agriculture, mines, markets, census operations, rights of women and so

on. To Kautilya, the state was an institutional necessity for human advancement. He outlined almost everything that the state should do and describe how it should be managed for the improvement of the individual living in it.²

According to Kautilya, the state comprises seven elements, king, minister, country, fort, the treasury, army and friend. This list is more comprehensive than the traditionally enumerated four elements necessary to constitute a state. Kautilya prescribes a code of ethics of high standard for the king. The king was head of administration and the final authority in all matters, both civil and military. Justice dispensation was to receive priority from him. Kautilya would not like the petitioners waiting at the door to get justice, observing that the urgent calls can be heard at once and never put off.³ The king made all senior appointments under the state, gave audience to ambassadors and met the spies to collect information. The king had for his aid and advice a council of ministers which included the prime minister and other ministers. The head of the army was the Commander-in-Chief (Senapati) whose advice in matters of war was paramount. The higher level functionaries must, without exception, be closely watched and supervised.⁴

CONCEPT OF GOVERNMENT

According to Kautilya, the government comprises two main elements, the king and the councilors. The king or sovereign was the head of the state. He was considered to be a mere mortal, though a favored mortal, the beloved of the deities. The possession of the material resources of a great empire and control over a vast standing army gave him enormous real power. But the power was not arbitrarily exercised.⁵ There was a body of ancient rules and the Puranas which even a despot viewed with respect. The people were an important element of the state. They were looked upon as children for whose welfare the king was responsible and to whom he owed a debt which could only be discharged by good government.⁶

POWERS OF KING

The powers of the king were extensive. He had military, judicial, legislative as well as executive functions. He considered plans of military operations with his commander-in-chief. He also sat in the court to administer justice. As to the king's legislative function, Kautilya calls him "Dharmapravartaka" and includes Rajyashasana among the source of law. Among executive functions of the king may be mentioned his power of appointment for various offices of the state. He was responsible for the posting of watchmen, attending to the accounts of receipts and expenditure, appointment of ministers, priests and superintendents, correspondence with the council of ministers, collection of the secret information gathered by spies, reception of envoys and so on. It was the king who laid down then broad lines of policy and issued instructions for the guidance of his officers and the people. Control was maintained over the most distant officials by an army of secret reporters and overseers. Communication with them was kept up by a network of roads and garrisons were posted at strategic points.⁷

SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty was possible only with assistance. The king was assisted by a council of ministers and advises him on policy- making and other important administrative matters. To Kautilya, all administrative measures are preceded by deliberations in a well- formed council. Secrecy was the hallmark of administration and sufficient safeguards were taken to guard the disclosure of government information. Whosoever discloses counsels shall be torn to pieces. Assisted by his prime minister and the high priest, the king should, by offering examine the character of ministers appointed by the government. Amatyas assisted the king in deliberating on public affairs. This class was surely small in number but in wisdom and justice excelled all the others.⁸

FINANCE

Kautilya laid great emphasis on finance. He states, “All undertakings depend on finance, hence foremost attention shall be paid to the treasury”. For purpose of administration, the empire was divided into provinces, each headed by a viceroy. There was an also feudatory vassal who owed allegiance to the emperor and placed their army and other resources at his disposal. There was a certain amount of decentralization, notably in the sphere of local government; a body of ministers had a right to be consulted specially in times of emergency.⁹

To him, permanent peace was not possible. He who is supreme inevitably wages war and therefore it is power that maintains peace between any two kings, skill in war in thus a better qualification for kingship than either power or enthusiasm. Kautilya made it clear that the king received the revenue from the people as his fee for the service of protection. According to him, the king was spiritually responsible for the faithful discharge of his functions. Kautilya insisted that the king should rule with the help of state officials and constantly consult his ministers.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Arthshastara portrays a paternal king imbued with the desire to promote the happiness and welfare of his subjects. In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness, in their welfare his welfare, whatever pleases himself he shall not consider as good, but whatever pleases his subjects he shall consider as good”..

The king shall ever be active and discharge his duties, the root of wealth is activity and for evil, it is reverse. The welfare of the people claims the first place in his eyes. The main function of the state was the maintenance of law and order, the punishment of wrong- doers and the protection of the subjects.

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