

## Book Review

# Kautilya's Arthashastra: Fusion of the Philosophical and the Strategic

Kajari Kamal

*Medha Bisht, Kautilya's Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy, London & New York, Routledge, 2020*

**M**edha Bisht's book, *Kautilya's Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy* is an important milestone in an ongoing journey to reveal the intellectual tradition of Kautilya's Arthashastra. Its key contribution is to present the ancient Indian treatise in a manner which highlights both its universality in terms of engagement with 'global' vocabularies of power, order, and morality, and particularity by expounding culturally embedded understanding of them, the 'local flavour', as it were.

### The Arthashastra as a Philosophy of Strategy

The first part of the book creatively alludes to the sub-title – 'Philosophy of Strategy' – through an engaging discussion on the Arthashastra's philosophical moorings and strategic undertones. The phrase succinctly encapsulates the essence of the treatise, which lies in the intertwining of abstract philosophical strands with prudent strategic insights. The significance of the interconnectedness between the cosmic understanding of order (developed in Hindu political thought) and the science of enquiry (philosophy) in Kautilyan grand strategic design is a resounding rebuttal to the more popular attribution to the text as furthering 'cynical, amoral power politics'. The book credibly establishes "Kautilya as an exemplar strategist reconciling Hindu values with strategy" (p. xi).

Perhaps, due to a largely exploratory and still evolving nature of research on the text, the book misses out on an alternate understanding of the term '*Anvikshiki*' (reasoned logical arguments) that appears in the book several times and provides a critical perspective to the text. It is averred that '*Anvikshiki*' is nothing but '*Nyaya*', an orthodox school of Indian

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Dr Kajari Kamal is a faculty member of the Strategic Studies Programme, Takshashila Institution, Bangalore.

philosophy concerned with logic and epistemology. Also, the philosophical substructure 'Yoga' is 'nyaya-vaishesika' and not *Yoga sutra* as was previously understood. Interestingly, in the light of this new understanding, the author's assertions appear more convincing. For example, *Vaishesika's* dictum that *the universal inheres in its particulars* alludes to the holism in Kautilya's grand strategy. *Dharma* in *Vaishesika darsana* is defined as "material progress and spiritual fulfillment" – a theme completely in tune with Kautilya's philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Desirable and the Feasible**

The discussion in the second part of the book on the desirability and feasibility of the central concepts, in a way, invokes the harmony between philosophy and strategy—philosophy shaping the desirable and strategy the feasible. This is reminiscent of John Herz's fusion of Political Realism and Political Idealism, which he terms 'Realist Liberalism', where political idealism provides the basic ethical assumption and therefore informs what 'should be', and political realism knowledge and insight.

### **The Arthashastra and Modern IR**

The third section of the book is a conversation between the vocabularies of Kautilya's Arthashastra and International Relations (IR) theory and practice. The author's objective is not to bracket it within existing paradigms, though she acknowledges similarities with Classical Realism and Wendtian Constructivism, but to spell out the "nuances of strategic/holistic/composite wisdom" of the text. In a discussion on anarchy and order in IR theory, the author posits that the neorealist understanding of anarchy which forms a deterministic structure, where political interests and identities are shaped in an anarchical environment, is at variance with the Arthashastra, where the "deterministic thrust is not placed so much on anarchy but on regulating and maintaining order" (p. 159).

Although the normative fallout of this understanding is attractive, it falls short on logic. *Matsya-nyaya* (law of the fish) which exists both in the internal and the external realms of the state can be curtailed only through the use of *danda* (use of rod or punishment), which is non-existent in the external realm. According to Benoy Kumar Sarkar, "the theory of state is therefore reared on two diametrically opposed conceptions – doctrine of *danda* which puts an end to *matsya-nyaya* among the members (*praja*) of the state and doctrine of *mandala* which maintains an international *matsya-nyaya*, or the civil war of races in the human family."<sup>2</sup> The relations among states in the *rajamandala* are shaped by geography, capabilities, relative strength, intentions and values—all factors broadly compatible with Political Realism.

## Grand Strategy in the Arthashastra

The book also revisits Arthashastra as an insightful text on grand strategy. Bisht convincingly establishes the ends, ways and means framework of grand strategy with *yogakshema* (safeguarding welfare of the people) as the end, *dharma* (order/duty) as the ways and *danda* (use of rod/weapon) as the means. In contrast to this philosophical articulation of grand strategy, one can alternately draw up a strategic conception with *yogakshema* as the end goal, *prakritis* (seven state factors) as the means and *sadgunyas* (six measures of foreign policy) as the ways. The fungibility of ideas from the philosophical to the strategic is indeed unique to the Arthashastra.

## Concluding Remarks

The book stands out in interrogating the text as a non-western intellectual resource by prioritizing ontological and epistemological inquiries, which illuminate the meanings of concept in diverse cultural settings. These concepts, as is claimed by the author, offer rich insights into strategic thinking. While the book examines in detail the strategic relevance of the Arthashastra (opening line of the book), it leaves the reader rather quizzical about the author's views on the concept of 'strategic culture'. It is of course a question whether this strategic tradition survived in post-colonial India, given the overbearing impact that colonization had on political ideas (p. 170). An exploration into contemporary relevance of Kautilyan thought, according to the present reviewer, may have qualitatively added to the significant exercise of broaching an interpretive exposition of the fundamental ideas of the *Arthashastra*.

The journey to reveal this intensely nuanced and layered text is gaining steam. From establishing it as a credible non-western treatise on Political Realism to deciphering its 'eclecticism', from seeking 'classical roots of modern politics in India' to studying it in a 'transcultural perspective', the scope of scholarship has substantially widened.<sup>3</sup> Medha Bisht's book is yet another substantive step to unearth the conceptual value of the Arthashastra and offers itself as a ready reference for political theorists and IR scholars, still broadly unaware of the text's intellectual richness.

## References

1. The *Vaisesikasutra* begins with the statement that its object is to explain "dharma" (I.i.1), which, according to it, is that "by which prosperity (*abhudaya*) and salvation (*nihshreyasa*) are attained", see Dasgupta, Surendranath. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Vol. 1. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975. p. 285.

2. Sarkar, Benoy Kumar. "Hindu Theory of International Relations." *The American Political Science Review* 13, no. 3 (August 1919): 400-14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1945958.pdf>.
3. Some of the recent works on Kautilya's Arthashastra include Liebig, Michael, and Saurabh Mishra. *The Arthashastra in a Transcultural Perspective: Comparing Kautilya with Sun-Zi, Nizam Al-Mulk, Barani and Machiavelli*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2017.; Mitra, Subrata K., and Michael Liebig. *Kautilyas Arthashastra, an Intellectual Portrait: The Classical Roots of Modern Politics in India*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2017.; and Shahi, Deepshikha. *Kautilya and Non-western IR Theory*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.