

Aristotle and Kautilya

A Comparative Account

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Abstract

The study of politics in a systematized way sprawls in the historic treatises of both Kautilya and Aristotle. The universal appeal in the ideas presented by both, labels them as political marvels, keeping the significance of contextual truths of society. Aristotle and Kautilya teach us the values of self-fulfilment and self-achievement. This paper is a humble attempt to widen the canvas of comparative study of both astutepolitical philosophers, teachers and mentors. The present zest of political inquiry to the comparative study between both would have far-reaching implications to the body of knowledge. Both, *Politics* of Aristotle and *Arthashastra* of Kautilya are the seminal contributions to the study of politics.

Keywords: *Greek, Slavery, Saptanga Theory, Rajamandala, Matsya Nyaya, Ideal State, statecraft, Good Life, Alexander, Chandragupta*

Introduction

Aristotle's system of thought is very often compared with other western political thinkers, especially with that of Machiavelli. There are various points of similarities and dissimilarities between the thoughts of Aristotle and Kautilya (an ancient Indian exponent of statecraft). On that very basis, we can have a comparative account of Aristotle and Kautilya's system of thought. To some extent, both thinkers are contemporary, because in 322 BC when Aristotle died, Kautilya was engaged in planning to destroy the Nanda Dynasty (Magadh), to establish the Maurya Dynasty under the leadership of Chandragupta Maurya.

Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher and thinker who is regarded as the father of political science. He was also described as the first political scientist (Maxey, 1956). Aristotle was the first political thinker who separated politics from ethics and gave a systematic theory of the origin, nature and functioning of the state. *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* are the famous writings of Aristotle and the fundamental sources of his political ideas. *Nicomachean Ethics* establishes his theories and *Politics* expounded upon them. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle first establishes his ideas about the common good and shows disagreement with Plato about the idea of good and ethics. He argues that "dear is Plato, dearer still is truth." Aristotle gives centrality to the practical aspects of human life. He notes that if ethics is purely theoretical then it does no good to the practical world we live in. Therefore, ethics must be treated practically. Aristotle admires the happiness theory of Plato and expounds it in his own way. He is the founder of happiness theory. Human life is not only around achievement but about love, happiness and respecting mind, body, spirit, compassionate relationships and having faith. We can say that Aristotle's method was determined by his empirical or inductive habit of mind, historic temper, respect for traditions and general readiness to accept the verdict of public opinion. Aristotle was different in methods from his teacher, Plato. Due to his scientific and comparative approach to the study of political science, he is known as Father of political science. According to Zeller, "the politics of Aristotle is the richest treasure that has come down to us from antiquity, it is the greatest contribution to the field of political science that we possess" (Jayapalan, 2002, p. 161). It is Aristotle who proclaims that "the state comes into existence, originated in the bare need of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of good life" (Aristotle, Book 1, p. 28). Aristotle is one of the most influential political thinkers in the history of political thought. Without his characteristically scientific approach to political issues, we would have an only political philosophy, not a Political Science¹.

Kautilya

On the other hand, Kautilya (375-283 BC) popularly known as Chanakya, was an ancient Indian teacher, philosopher, economist, jurist and royal advisor. Kautilya assisted the first Mauryan emperor Chandragupta in his rise to power.

He is widely credited for having played an important role in the establishment of the Maurya Empire. Kautilya served as the chief advisor to both emperors Chandragupta and his son Bindusara². He is traditionally identified as Kauilya or Vishnugupta, who authored the ancient Indian political treatise, the *Arthashastra*, a text dated roughly around the 4th century BC. One sees the faint beginnings of political ideas in *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and other epics, and then their crystallizations in the myths of the creation of the state in several Brahmanical and Buddhist texts. The most full-fledged outlining of the theory of state is found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Singh & Roy, 2011, p. xv). U.N. Ghoshal notes that "Kautilya makes a closer analysis and expresses a sounder judgement on the points at issue and reconstructs the science of politics" (Ghoshal, 1996, p. 375). It has been a historical irony that the *Arthashastra* written probably in 4th century BC was first discovered by a pandit in Tanjore in 1904 and translated and published by R. Shamasastri in 1915. The book prominently deals with constituent elements of the state, major departments of government, taxation system, armed force, the network of spies and the theory of Rajamandala and foreign policy (Singh & Roy, 2011, p. 2). This book marks a departure from the earlier ancient Indian tradition dominated by the supremacy of religion in every sphere of human life. It was the manual on statecraft and art of administration. Kautilya himself views his *Arthashastra* as "the science of statecraft, of politics, and of administration" (Cited in Arora & Awasthi, 2007, p. 376).

Like Aristotle, Kautilya was the first Indian political thinker who declared the independent status of polity and highlighted its significant role in human life. Kautilya's contemporary thinkers did not write as much as he wrote on the statecraft. In this sense, we can not agree with the statement of A. B. Keith that,

it is a very misplaced patriotism which asks us to admire Arthshastra as representing the line flower of Indian political thought. It would, indeed, be melancholy if this were the best that India could show as against the Republic of Plato and the Politics of Aristotle. (cited in Kangle, 1965, p. 274).

As far as constituent elements of the state are concerned Kautilya's Saptanga theory is more profound than that of Aristotle. Although, Aristotle talks about certain elements of state ie. territory or geography, population, government,

army and treasury but does not talk about the element of the ally(friend). However, *Arthashastra* marks a paradigm shift from political philosophy to political science. Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle emphasize on political philosophy, whereas Kautilya focuses on practical realism or realpolitik. *Arthashastra* aims to show how a state ought to be ruled. *Arthashastra* speaks in terms of a highly materialistic world, perceived by Kautilya keeping the moral angle aside. The purpose of it was the practical aim to show how governments ought to be run. Not only that, but there are also many areas of similarities and dissimilarities between Aristotle and Kautilya's concepts of the state, therefore, a comparison could be made between both great champions of the theory of the state.

Similarities

There are various areas of similarities between Aristotle and Kautilya. Both are great exponents of the organic theory of the state. Aristotle argues that the “state is prior to the individual”. It means that the state is natural. We cannot define an individual as an individual without having any idea of a state. An individual is an individual when he lives within the state, Otherwise, he is either God or devil. It implies that there is an organic relationship between the state and individuals. Kautilya's theory of Matsya Nyaya and Saptanga theory of state represents an organic notion of the state. According to saptanga theory, the state is comprised of seven elements- Swami (the king), Amatya (the minister), Suhrid (the ally), Kosha (the treasure) Danda (represents the army), Durga (the fort) and Pura or Janapada (the territory or the population). Kautilya draws parallels between the organs of the state and the corresponding organs of the human body.

Secondly, both political thinkers are realistic in their zest of political inquiry. Their ideas about the state and governance are the products of the crisis of the society of their age. In this respect, their methodology is more inductive than deductive. They construe their theories of state with their times and circumstances.

Thirdly, according to Prof. B. K. Jha, Aristotle and Kautilya both are great advocates of male supremacy. According to Aristotle, a wife has to obey the commands of her husband. While Kautilya argues that a wife is regarded as 'Bharya' when she lives under the subjection of her husband. He further writes

that both are ardent supporters of slavery. For Aristotle, slavery is just and beneficial both: for Kautilya, slaves are a very significant component for economy and agriculture. To Aristotle, Greeks could not be the slaves, Kautilya does argue that the Aryans could not be the slaves. Thus, the ideas of both are flavoured with an acute sense of nationalism, racialism and casteism (Jha, 1983, p. 458).

Fourthly, both believe that undue strain on any element of the state would culminate into the destruction of the whole structure of the state. Both are great supporters of personal property, Aristotle opines that in absence of property one could not develop one's personality or attain mental and moral growth. Kautilya also emphatically argues that “essence of religion is artha”; “the poor people have no wisdom”; “wealth is needed for all type of worldly works”, and “a poor man is insulted even by his wife”. To them, personal property was essential for all-round development of one's personality.

Fifthly, Aristotle and Kautilya both argue that the way to earn wealth or money should be fair and lawful. Aristotle highlights two ways to earn wealth- natural and unnatural. The wealth earned from natural resources is of natural type; the wealth earned from usury or *gombeen*, trade etc., is unnatural type. He asserted the natural way to earn wealth and rejects the unnatural way to earn it. Similarly, Kautilya also emphasises that wealth must be earned by good conduct or as per rule, not by any unjust means (p. 459).

Sixthly, both are ardent advocates of the distributive theory of justice in the sense that both believe in the allocation of power and position of offices according to one's ability and qualifications.

Finally, Aristotle and Kautilya both were great teachers, friends, philosophers and guides who mentored their famous students -Alexander and Chandragupta respectively, and taught the art of war. They were marvellous human beings and remembered for their inspiring master-mentor relationships. One can eulogize the way they have fought their battles and created a name in the history of humanity.

Dissimilarities

Besides similarities, there are fundamental differences between Aristotle and Kautilya. First, Aristotle explains the theoretical aspects of politics, Kautilya

focuses on practical or behavioural aspects of politics. At the level of theoretical politics, if Kautilya is ranked inferior in comparison to Greek thinkers, then in terms of practical aspects of politics, Plato and Aristotle are inferior in comparison to Kautilya.

Secondly, the objective to Aristotle's politics to discover happiness theory and to establish an ideal state in which an individual attains his self-fulfilment or human excellence, while the chief concern of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is to acquire and maintain the earth. In this respect, *Arthashastra* has two major objectives: (a) to discover the ways through which a ruler can protect his domain; (b) to discover the ways through which he can add new territories to his domain (Arora & Awasthi, 2007, p. 376). Thirdly, it is true that like Aristotle, Kautilya also supports slavery, but he does not believe in the natural notion of slavery, rather he illuminates on human and fair treatment for the slaves.

Fourthly, Aristotle is very critical about traders and moneylenders because they don't work and are parasites in society. They only think for themselves, and the accumulation of wealth is their primary matter of interest. That's why he regards trade as unethical (Barker, 1906, p. 38). Unlike Aristotle, Kautilya asserts that management of trade or commercial activities is a very essential function of the state. Not only that, where Aristotle regards usury as unethical, for Kautilya it is the source of state revenue.

Fifthly, Aristotle is a great advocate of the sovereignty of law. He argues that "rule of law is preferable to that of any individual...for the law is unaffected by reasons" (cited in Jha, 1983, p. 303). On the other hand, Kautilya is a strong supporter of the sovereignty of the state. His views on Rajamandala (Mandal Theory) is an explicit reflection of it, which is based on the maxim that a friend's friend is likely to be a friend and an enemy's friend an enemy. Sixthly, according to Kautilya, stability of state depends upon the awareness and vigilance of the king. But Aristotle essentialises the importance of middle class to get rid of the possibilities of rebellion and to restore the stability of the state.

Seventh, Kautilya's theory of Rajamandala (the circle of state) does not only represent a detailed theory of foreign policy but also focuses on various aspects of inter-state relations. Rangarajan is the first to use the term foreign policy in the context of Kautilya's Rajamandala theory (Rangarajan, 1992). As far as Aristotle is concerned his system of thought does not represent such a wider

canvas of foreign policy as illuminated by Kautilya. In this backdrop, Kautilya looks more pragmatic and practical than Aristotle.

Lastly, According to Virendra Dafane, Aristotle was the first teacher and was the first one to be called as 'The Philosopher' on this planet. Aristotle was the founder of 'happiness theory' and tutor to Alexander. He did teach fundamentals of war, strategy and as well as happiness and love related aspects to Alexander. Aristotle was always in touch with Alexander however never participated in war strategy directly. If you look at Chanakya (Kautilya), he was the teacher, philosopher, economist, and royal advisor. He was famous for his wisdom and '*Arth-niti*' (Concepts of economics). Kautilya mentored Chandragupta for big battles as well as for small tactics. He played a larger role directly in defeating the Nanda. This attribute was the significant difference between Kautilya and Aristotle (Dafane, 2016).

Conclusion

The systematized study of politics is found in the historic treatises of both Kautilya and Aristotle. The universal appeal in the ideas presented by both, labels them as political marvels, keeping the significance of contextual truths of society. By comparing Aristotle and Kautilya, students of politics can derive very valuable lessons of the sense of fulfilment as well as the sense of achievement. "History remains relevant as long as we keep learning from it. So, live a life where we balance the sense of achievement and sense of fulfilment both" (Dafane, 2016). They are not only the great theorists of the state but also regarded as the great teachers and mentors for their mentee. Though there are various similarities and dissimilarities between the two excellent political thinkers, as far as their system of thought is concerned no one can be regarded inferior to another. Both Aristotle and Kautilya will always be remembered for their unprecedented and original contributions to the science of politics.

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Endnotes

ⁱ <http://law-projects.blogspot.com/2013/04>

ⁱⁱ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/:2020>