

HS0.301: Classical Text Readings-1

Short Assignment-2

**Q:**

Explore the differences between the state described in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and our contemporary nation-state. Give references to the original text in making your points.

Word Limit: 500 Words

**Ans:**

Kautilya's Arthashastra was one of the early texts in statecraft with the aim of *Yogakshema* - protection, security and stability of the state. Moreover, Kautilya was the first to define a state with his *saptanga* theory. The *Saptanga Theory* defines a state as consisting of seven interrelated and interlocked constituent limbs or elements (angas or prakritis), and these seven angas are:

- i. *Swami (the lord, i.e., the king),*
- ii. *Amatya (ministers),*
- iii. *Janapada (the territory and the people),*
- iv. *Durga (the fortified capital),*
- v. *Kosa (the treasury),*
- vi. *Danda (justice or force),*
- vii. *Mitra (ally).*

According to Kautilya, these seven angas are ordered according to their importance for the state, The *swami* being the most important and the *Mitra* being the least. The *swami* in the *Saptanga theory* has a fatherly role towards the *janapada* as their protector.

Many argue that while formulating the ideals, principles, and ethical strategies for Arthashastra, Kautilya recognized the events of its days and those likely to happen in the future, making it relevant even today. However, many differences exist between the contemporary nation-state and the Arthshastrian state.

Kautilya presumed the king as an absolute monarch and equivalent to the state without any clear distinction between the king and governance. "*The king to whom the AŚ is addressed is an absolute monarch; all authority in areas of governance, law, economic activities, foreign relations, and the conduct of war rests with him.*" (pg 38).

However, in today's world, the definition of a state is much different. Democracy is the most common form of government, and the head of the state is an elected position rather than an inherited one. Now the head of a state is answerable towards the state's population and can be changed after a fair election, even after possessing all the qualities that Kautilya wanted any ideal ruler to have. Rather than being a fatherly figure, now the head of the people is elected for the people by the people.

Kautilya's imagination of the state has a vivid emphasis on the internal and external security of the state. The Arthashastra was written when various kingdoms were constantly fighting with each other for the expansion of territory and survival. However, now we have various organizations, such as United Nations, that constantly work to safeguard global peace.

Emphasizing the state's security, Kautilya gave equal importance to spies and secret agents in Arthashastra. "*The drama Mudrārākṣasa of Viśākhadatta provides a colourful glimpse into this secret world of espionage and sting operations envisaged by Kauṭilya.*" (pg 42).

He extensively believed in using the agents to spy on the population, and neighbouring kingdoms, check government officials' integrity, get rid of enemies, etc. However, in contemporary society, privacy is a fundamental right, and the state can not spy on its citizens without any reason. Moreover, sending spies to other countries is against various peace treaties and can even lead to war.

So, we can say that Arthshastra is an excellent source of statecraft and a tool for understanding ancient Indian society. Still, society has changed with time and grown different from the state Kautilya imagined.

References:

1. Introduction: Section 5, Reading the Arthaśāstra (from Olivelle - King, Governance and Law in Ancient India, Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra)