

Kautilya's Arthsastra : The Wonder It Was & the Wonder It Remains

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An Overview

Kautilya's work *Arthsastra*,¹ is filled with maxims that have over the millenniums become part of our every day life. For instance, the four strategems of *Saam* (conciliation or treaty), *Daam* (reward or money), *Dand* (retribution) or *Bhed* (dissension) continue to be amongst the best used political dictums across the world. Essentially a treatise on economy of a state, it is a compendium of precepts, advice and lessons on the art of governance of a nation state (*Rashtra*). It counsels a monarch on : how to administer his kingdom, how to frame and follow foreign policy with friends, neutrals and potential adversaries. Besides being a unique document of administration, it also encompasses strategic thinking, warfare, espionage and counter-espionage. It serves two primary purposes: 'one who aspires for peace should prepare for war' and, 'without good administration there cannot be good governance.' The beauty of the Book lies in the fact that the situations visualised some 2,300 years ago remain astonishingly relevant to date. It is so, despite the Industrial Revolution and ever-continuing march of science and technology besides revolutions in military affairs.

About the Book

The *Arthsastra* contains fifteen *Adhikarnas* or Books: The first five Books deal with internal administration of the state and the following eight cover its relations with neighbours, while the concluding two are on miscellaneous subjects. Written in Sanskrit, and translated in several international languages, it is read with fervour even today. Almost all aspects of governance, warfare, armed forces, economics, social life, offences and punishments are covered. For example, the first chapter of Book One 'concerning discipline' contains detailed table of contents and in one verse (1.1.18), states that it has 150 chapters, 180 *prakarnas* and six thousand verse in all. (A *prakarna* is a section devoted to a specific topic).² A brief on the contents of each of the 15 Books below

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shows clearly that all functions of statecraft and governance are covered comprehensively to facilitate their understanding and compliance, both by the 'ruler and the ruled'.

Book One (21 Chapters). Outlines the duties of the King, his training and protection; qualitative requirements for selection of ministers – their desired traits like integrity and overall capability of governance as king's representatives; and highlights the continuous need to watch and control the 'seducible' elements of the state.

Book Two (36 Chapters). Includes subjects relating to duties of the government administrators, superintendents, and intelligence agencies; responsibilities of the Commander-in- Chief, superintendents of chariots and infantry – the upkeep, welfare, training and employment of horses, elephants and cattle (as load carriers in the war zone) as essential parts of war machinery.

Book Three (20 Chapters). Elaborates on the '*code of law*' and '*duties of judges*'. The King as *Dharmaraj* (as law giver and custodian of faith) was to ensure the 'rule of law' and imparting of 'equitable justice' throughout the kingdom.

Book Four (12 Chapters). Aptly titled '*Removal of Thorns*' deals primarily with the Policing System and meting out *punishment* to law breakers and providing relief to the people affected either by natural calamities or hostile / criminal acts of human beings.

Book Five (Six Chapters). Describes measures taken to suppress treason and seditious elements, to safeguard the King and his kingdom from various threats.

Book Six (Two Chapters). Firstly, amplifies that the king, the minister, the country, the fortifications (defence measures), the treasury and the army with alliances constitute the nation state. Thereafter, the profile and best qualities required in the King and his advisers, for ensuring effective governance, are described. Secondly, it explains the types of neighbours and the circle of states (*Mandala Theory*) in various forms of alliance and conflict.

Book Seven (18 Chapters). Deals with six measures called *Sadgunya* of state foreign policy termed as: *Sandhi* (treaty), *Vigraha* (war); *Asana* (neutrality), *Yaan* (accretion of power), *Samarsya* (seeking alliance) and *Dwaidhibhava* (double policy of waging war with one and peace with another). (Book Six and Seven are interconnected and form a common forum for comprehending their

applicability). Kautilya pronounced 'politics as a science well before Aristotle. All others like Machiavelli (1513 AD) and Clausewitz (1832 AD) learnt from him when they said "War is a continuation of politics by other means."³

Book Eight (Five Chapters). Explains *Vyasanās* (calamities) that afflict a nation and affect the King and his kingdom; from internal revolt, preparedness of the army to face enemies of the King due to his addiction to vices or bad health and the common man on account of *Kama* (lust), *Krodha* (anger), *Lobh* (greed) and *Moha* (attachment / desire).

Book Nine (Seven Chapters) and **Book Ten** (Six Chapters). Related to 'The Activity of the King about to March' and 'Concerning War', both should be read conjointly. *Book Nine* deals with strategic planning for (offensive) military operations; intelligence on enemy capabilities and likely courses of action; assessment of relative strengths and selection of campaigning season; economy of effort; troops to tasks; security of rear areas including handling of revolts and rebels; and reliability of allies and cooperation and coordination with them for ensuring decisive victory. *Book Ten* deals with 'setting the camp; march from camp; fighting and countering enemy action; suitability of ground for action; functions of various components and forming up forces for various actions.

Book Eleven (One Chapter). Deals with how a would-be-conqueror should subjugate oligarchical principalities hostile to a nation state.

Book Twelve (Five Chapters). Suggests the ways and means a weaker king should adopt to outwit and outmanoeuvre a stronger hostile king to finally triumph.

Book Thirteen (Five Chapters). Deals with the strategy of capturing a fort or laying a siege and then storming it by employment of secret agents.

Book Fourteen (Four Chapters). Contains various secret remedies and means used for the destruction of the enemy. Magical and mystical lures along with occult practices are also mentioned.

Book Fifteen (One Chapter). Provides a scientific tenor to the *Arthsastra* with the Epilogue: 'The Method of Science'. It illustrates various devices to elucidate this 'Scientific Subject' and contains a long and anecdotal / referral material numbering 72. It highlights

the well established stratagems of *Saam*, *Daam(n)*, *Bhed* and *Dand* as essential tools of statecraft.

Significantly, Jawaharlal Nehru has mentioned Kautilya and Arthashastra repeatedly in his book 'Discovery of India' and thought it to be of '*inestimable value*'.⁴

A Peep into History

It may be necessary to understand, as to what led Chandragupta Maurya and his mentor Vishnugupta Kautilya (or, Chanakya) to undertake this prodigious study and write the *Arthashastra* in such a comprehensive form. It was definitely the misdeeds of the Nanda dynasty and the *Battle of Hydaspes*, commonly known as the *Battle of Jhelum* (326 BC) that left India shaken and shattered and virtually enslaved. That slavery, fortunately, lasted for such a brief period that it could be ignored. To recall, Alexander the Great led his army into Asia, with the primary objective of capturing the Persian Empire under King Darius; ostensibly, to seek a revenge caused through an earlier defeat of the Greeks by the Persians. Alexander marched through Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, the Palestine, Persia subduing the conquered territories, leaving his army to rule the captured territories and ensuring security of his further advance over Afghanistan to the Jhelum, in Punjab. He arrived on the North bank of the Jhelum River in the spring of 326 BC.

The melting snow of the Himalayas and early monsoon had turned this 500 metre wide river into a formidable water obstacle. It was not fordable everywhere, and was being strengthened further by strong coverage of its southern bank by the army of King Porus. The assessment in the Porus army was that Alexander would have to retreat; and even if he tried crossing, he would be destroyed.

Alexander, a skillful military leader, with many major military successes behind him, chose to 'condition' Porus to his false design that his army was relaxing in the encampment and were unable to cross the river. He then proceeded to mislead his opponent by a series of small scale manoeuvres leading to feints both by day and night in front and on flanks. That carried on for several weeks. All this time his 'light troops', armed parties kept foraging the countryside for supplies, terrorised and bribed the locals to indicate the likely crossing points in the North. That was fixed approx 25 km upstream.

Simultaneously, the boats that he had built surreptitiously, were moved to the vicinity of the crossing place and concealed. Gradually the troops were concentrated over a series of nights and the river front continued to be held by smaller number of troops giving a semblance of the Greeks still encamped there. To add to the element of surprise to this deception, he chose bad weather – a stormy night – when he appreciated that the vigilance by the enemy troops would be low. At the time crossing commenced, some of his troops landed on an un-reconnoitred and undetected island but the others crossed from a shallow site.

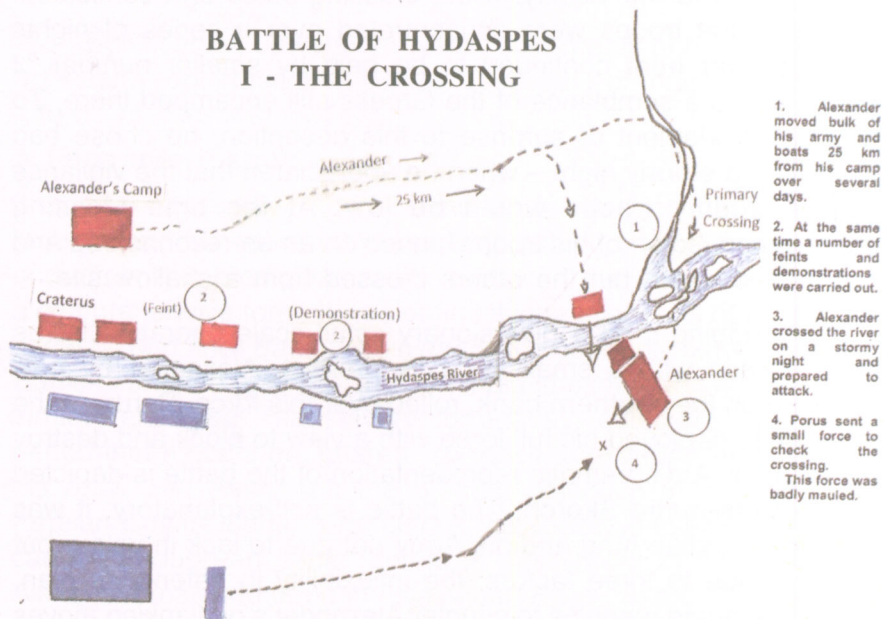
Misjudging it as a diversionary small scale operation Porus sent his son with a small force to interdict. Alexander by now firmed in on the southern bank, rolled over this force. Porus, in the meanwhile deployed his full force with a view to block and destroy the invader. A diagrammatic representation of the battle is depicted on the **Schematic Sketch**. The battle is self-explanatory, it was lost by the Indian King and his Army not due to lack in valour but primarily due to three factors: the inflexibility in defender's plan, lack of adequate reserves to counter Alexander's outflanking moves and the absence of a strategic culture of having alliances and coalitions to mutually come to the assistance of each other.

The question also arises, why the elephants of Porus failed to tilt the balance? Elephants, like horsed cavalry were the *force du frappe* of Porus, but here Alexander's multi-pronged, almost simultaneous attacks exposed the elephants to attack by the Greek infantry, who killed the *mahouts* and wounded the animals. Though trained to trample the enemy, the injured animals charged madly through their own troops, causing confusion and loss of control and thus became one of the immediate causes of defeat. There were other causes too. For instance, it would appear that not enough resources were employed by Porus to gain intelligence about enemy's strength and plans. As a result, Alexander managed to achieve surprise and gain initiative.

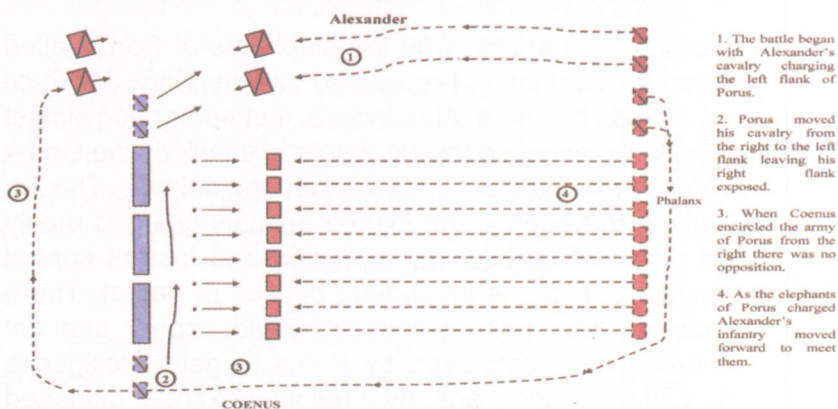
On his part, Alexander had fought his last battle at the Jhelum and while he won this battle due to his brilliant tactics, fearlessness and boldness, he was equally magnificent in his gesture of returning the kingdom to Porus. An imprisoned Porus, so Greek Historian Plutarch says, when asked by Alexander how he would like to be treated, retorted valiantly: "As a King should be treated by another

Schematic Sketch – Battle of Jhelum (326 BC)

BATTLE OF HYDASPES I - THE CROSSING



II - THE BATTLE



NOT TO SCALE

King." Alexander restored his kingdom to the vanquished Porus and then left some of his lieutenants to govern India, he himself returning via Taxila where King Ambhi again hosted, feasted and equipped the fatigued but still victorious Greek Army before wheeling back through the desert and sea to Persia. Seleukos Nikator, the ablest of the generals left behind, made further foray into the Indo-

Gangetic plains but signed a treaty of friendship with Chandragupta Maurya who had ousted the Nandas by now; it was then, one sees Magasthenes remaining as Nikator's plenipotentiary at Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital, giving later generations a better perspective of India of those days through *Arian's Indica*.

Contribution and Continuing Relevance of the Arthsastra

An analytical study of the *Arthsastra* suggests that Chandragupta had made an extensive study of the causes and consequences, not only of the fall of the Nanda dynasty, but also of the failure of Porus at Jhelum. Accordingly, he introduced qualitative improvement in the Mauryan Army; in matters of tactics, defence and defence-works, encampment and forts and their defence, the security of the sovereign and all commanders from *Senapati* down to *Padika*, considerations for crossing of water obstacles, movement through deserts, forests and mountains, the formations for attack and defence – and even withdrawal. Added to these were the indispensable 'reserves'. View, for example, the tactical wisdom on reserves: Book 10.5 puts it; "Having gone a distance of 200 bows, the king should take his position together with reserves; without reserves, he should never attack..."

Selection of campaigning season formed a strategic consideration, as significant as the overall plan for operations and even the role of allies. While more thoughts are shared on allies later, the consideration for campaigning season prioritised the 'Spring' and the 'Autumn'. All these considerations must have been the key to the expansion of the Mauryan Empire that extended from Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean – creating for once the fabled *Bharat*.

The responsibility of a king (or head of state) as outlined in Book 9.2-7 shows the strategic brilliance of thoughts and clarity of concepts on national security. Possibility of insurrection in the kingdom; engineered, as drummed repeatedly, by high functionaries such as ministers, head priest, even by a disaffected prince when the king is on a foreign expedition, is examined in the light of 'ulterior motives' that impel them to revolt. There is indirect allusion to the presence of so called 'quislings' in the court and even the palace.

Logistics and communications were given due importance.

Thorough logistical appreciations culminated in detailed planning for supplies, transportation, treatment and evacuation of casualties, redressal and care of war widows and orphans. Every administrative aspect was attended to. Little wonder then, a king was personally responsible for the planning of an operation and clearly accountable for success and reverse. He couldn't be passing the euphemistic 'buck' to others.

Two more significant aspects of war were given due importance. The care and morale of the civilians in the occupied territories was the first. There was to be no 'scorched earth policy' or wholesale destruction, murders and killings or ill-treatment. People were treated humanely and won over; the troops were to go in as 'liberators and not conquerors'. The *Arthsastra* warns: "A country without people makes no sense as there can be no kingdom without people". No genocide, was the ordinance. In fact, the then civil affairs organisations that formed part of the invading force raised not only supplies for the troops but recreated local levies for its own army. Rarely was action, to disarm and disband the defeated army resorted to, unlike what the USA did in Iraq, with worse consequences.

Another important point was psychological motivation of own combatants for the operations. There was, besides material and spiritual aspects, the inalienable faith of the Indians in the teachings of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagwad Gita*, all of whom, in their immutable wisdom, continuously preached the 'immortality of the soul', the '*Karmanya*' or duty of soldiers, their probable death and disability while in combat or combat like duties. And a soldier, should he die, (it was a forlorn hope that he wouldn't) would make his way to Heaven; on the Earth with victory behind him, he would enjoy the fruits of an honourable life. With these, the families of the dead were to be cared for by the king and honours were to be piled on the victorious soldiers. This 'battle for the hearts and minds' would continue through the campaign.

The Security of a State is irretrievably linked with foreign or external affairs. That's where the *Arthsastra* does an equally enviable work for guidance to the king in foreign affairs and expounds the much associated dictum of: *Saam*, *Daam*, *Dand* and *Bhed*. It suggests Six Measures or *Sadgunya* constituting measures of *Sandhi*, *Vigraha*, *Asaana*, *Yaana*, *Samarsya* and

Dwaidhibhava for conducting foreign affairs with the enemy, the potential adversary, the friendly powers, the neutrals (indifferent) and all those who would ally with the king against an inimical power. Out of this came the popular theory of *Mandal* and *Rajmandal* – conglomeration of states – with varying degrees of influence and inter-state relations.

The concept of *Mandala* was *ipso-facto* related to increasing growth of the power of the state and any number of permutations and combinations were expected to have been achieved according to the strategic needs, the *raison d'être* of which was always to compete with and grow stronger than an acknowledged adversary. The alliance thus obtained, it was emphasised, must not run into calamitous situation (calamities elucidated in Book 8.5.21) which otherwise adversely affect the contribution of an ally. Alliance to succeed had to act with adequate perseverance and full understanding of each other's aims, objectives, strength and limitations. Such a doctrine then – and also relevant in modern diplomacy – speaks well of the tenets of diplomacy advocated and practised during Kautilya's time.

The impermanence of *Sandhi* is also discussed in the *Arthsastra* with equal realism. A treaty with or without stipulation, as alluded in Book 7.6.112, was to be guided in accordance with the principle enunciated thus: "The observance on both sides entering into a treaty made by means of what is agreeable and beneficial and carrying out of conditions as agreed upon and their safeguarding is clinging to a treaty..." Earlier, it emphasises that the treaties made for 'open war', 'concealed war', 'silent war' could be 'spoiled' or 'repaired'. Apparently, treaties could never be 'permanent by binding'; they must have been a sort of 'marriage of convenience' – to be broken at mutual convenience. History has been witness to innumerable treaties being 'pieces of papers', to be dumped into dustbins or consigned to flame. But the principle of *Sadgunya* has served as a beacon of light throughout the history of diplomacy and diplomatic interface – if not all over the world, but certainly in India.

In summation one would gratefully quote Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister from page 96 of his book 'Discovery of India': "*Bold and scheming, proud and resourceful, never forgetting a slight, never forgetting his purpose, availing himself of every*

device to delude and defeat his enemy, he sat with the reins of empire in his hands and looked upon the emperor more as beloved pupil than as a master... There was hardly anything that Chanakya (Kautilya) would have refrained from doing to achieve his purpose; he was unscrupulous enough, yet he was wise enough to know that this very purpose might be defeated by means unsuited to the end."

Endnotes

1. The Arthashastra, like much of the old Indian literature was lost until Shamasastri, the Librarian of the Mysore Oriental Library located one copy and translated it in 1905. It led to greater evolutionary search. The first three editions of the 'translations' of the Book by R Shamasastri were published in 1915, 1923 and 1929. The fourth edition was reprinted in 1944 and the fifth in 1956.
2. '*Kautilya: The Arthshastra*' by LN Rangarajan (Penguin books, India (P) Ltd, New Delhi, 1987), p. 21.
3. To the Western world, Nicolo Machiavelli and Carl von Clausewitz introduced the concepts of strategy and statecraft. In the East, readers may realise, adequate thought had been given to these subjects by Sun Tzu in China (BC 500) and Kautilya in India.
4. The '*Discovery of India*' by Jawaharlal Nehru (Published by The Signet Press, Calcutta, 1946), refer to pages 73, 85, 90, 96-97, 99, 111 and 128.

On Kautilya

Kautilya, in my way of thinking, is as big a military thinker as Sun Tzu; and indeed, an outstanding political thinker, a statesman who gave inspiration to Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel amongst others to follow his teachings at the time of our Independence. As Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army I had the privilege to see closely the Sardar follow Chanakya in precept and practice. Chanakya has also much to offer to the Nation and to its strategists.

- Field Marshal KM Cariappa, 09 Mar 1991.

(In Foreword, of the book '*Generals and Strategists : From Kautilya to Thimayya*' by Brigadier Chandra B Khanduri (Retd))