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Evolution of the Modern State in India: Comparing Kautilya, Machiavelli, Nizam-ul-Mulk, Barani and Sun-Tzu¹

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The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) convened a two-day workshop in Singapore on 25 February 2016 to discuss the core concepts of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and compare them with the politico-strategic writings of Sun-Tzu (*The Art of War*), Niccolo Machiavelli (*Discorsi* and *Il Principe*), Persia's Nizam ul-Mulk (*The Book of Government*) and the political philosopher Barani (*Fatwa-i-Jahandari*). This international workshop was organised jointly with the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), Delhi (India).

The central endeavour at the workshop was to understand the manifest and latent influence of Kautilyan thought on the foreign policy and domestic politics of South Asia. The workshop also tried to establish whether there had been a 'trans-cultural flow' of Kautilyan thought-figures beyond the South Asian subcontinent.

¹ This ISAS Special Report is based on the proceedings of a workshop as well as the paper-abstracts submitted by the respective participants.

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From the very outset, participants in the workshop highlighted how Kautilya's *Arthashastra* had predominantly been explored under Indologist traditions and how the relevance of the text could be enhanced by situating it within the context of comparative political theory.

Keynote Address

The workshop commenced with a keynote address from **Col (Retd.) P K Gautam**, Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), who spoke in general terms about how Kautilyan concepts in the *Arthashastra* were relevant to statecraft and international relations today. According to Col Gautam, many of the core ideas in the *Arthashastra* have stood the test of time, and, due to their universal and enduring nature, have helped explain extant state behaviour. He also noted how Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is finally getting recognised as a relevant and significant text, leading to the unearthing of a treasure trove of ideas, particularly on strategic thinking, by eminent international academics, especially the community of scholars devoted to International Studies.

First Session

The first session focussed on "Kautilya and the Contemporary State: Theoretical and Methodological Issues".

The first speaker of the session, **Professor Subrata K Mitra**, Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, spoke on "Kautilya in a Trans-cultural Perspective: Research Relevance and Theoretical Framing". Professor Mitra argued that state and politics in India today are the result of a seamless evolution from the pre-modern past. The main goal of the paper was to show the re-use of Kautilyan state-conception in the institutions of modern India and beyond the specific case of India. The paper aims at a generalisation of state-formation in transitional societies. He argued that "the designing of the modern state in India through strategic re-use, hybridity, trans-cultural flow and the innovative politics of Gandhi, Patel, Nehru and their lesser-known acolytes is not an idiosyncratic feature of Indian history and culture. Instead, we assert that this narrative is a variation on the general theme of state-formation in transitional societies". This

was developed in the paper in terms of a brief introduction into the key concepts of hybridity, habitus, re-use and resilience, and a brief perusal of institutional arrangements of the state in India in terms of these categories.

Dr Michael Liebig, a Fellow at the South Asian Institute (SAI), Heidelberg University, and Lecturer at SAI's Department of Political Science, spoke on "A Dual Methodological Approach in Comparative Political Theory: 'Covariance' and 'Idea Migration'". He argued that it is possible that the 'rationalist' and scholarly treatment of politics and statecraft originated from the 'spiritualistic' space of the Indian subcontinent. According to Dr Liebig, Eurocentrism makes it difficult for us to believe that Kautilyan thought-figures might have influenced – via trans-temporal and trans-cultural 'idea migration' and hybridisation – occidental theorising on inter-state relations. These homologies between Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and pre-modern and/or modern works on statecraft outside South Asia may be explained through independent, parallel generation of thought-figures in distinct cultural and historical contexts ('covariance' approach) or through a hybridised trans-cultural and trans-temporal flow of Kautilyan thought-figures ('idea migration' approach).

Second Session

The second session looked at the "*Arthashastra: Concepts and Evolution*". **Col (Retd.) P K Gautam** presented his research findings on "What do we know about the *Arthashastra*'s origination, migration and diffusion". He began by tracing the historical context, the intellectual currents and the identity of the author of the text. Col Gautam highlighted how the *Arthashastra* emerged in an intellectual environment where Buddhist and Upanishadic enlightenment (6th century BC) was in conflict with *Lokayata* thinkers. His paper explained how the core concepts of the *Arthashastra* – the four approaches (*upayas*), the seven constituents of the state (*prakrits*), the six measures of foreign policy (*rajmandala*), and power (*Shakti*) – supplement and reinforce modern ideas of International Relations. Col Gautam also elaborated on how these concepts of statecraft are echoed throughout Indian history and have also migrated to the outside world. These concepts were predominantly exported as stories in the form of books such as the *Panchatantra*.

Dr Saurabh Mishra, Research Assistant at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), presented his findings on “The Kautilyan Concept of *Rajadharma*: Authority and Legitimacy in the Context of Ancient Indian Political Thought”. The aim was to find an ethical thread in the *Arthashastra* and challenge the general perception that it is an amoral/immoral text that serves as a handbook for the ruling elites. According to Dr Mishra, the concept of *Rajadharma* in the *Arthashastra* is a traditional term as well as an ethical yardstick for evaluating the performance of the State and the government.

Third Session

The third session was an inquiry into “Pre-Modern and Modern International Relations Theory”.

Dr Michael Liebig presented his research findings on “The Concept Clusters *saptanga* and *shadgunya* Underpinning the Kautilyan Idea of Raison D’état”. According to Dr Liebig, the *saptanga* theory – a conceptual foundation of Kautilya’s theory of state and statecraft – means that state power is an aggregate of material and immaterial variables. The seven factors that constitute state power are: the ruler; the minister (government and administration); the people (in the countryside); the fortress (capital city); the treasury (economy); armed might; and the ally (in foreign policy). In the *shadgunya* theory the state has six policy options to conduct its foreign policy: peace; war; neutrality; coercive diplomacy; alliance-building and ‘dual policy’ (diplomatic duplicity). And which of the six foreign-policy options to follow is determined by the intrinsic connectivity between the *shadgunya* and *saptanga* theories. Furthermore, within the foreign policy architecture, it is not one’s own state’s power potential that is decisive, rather it is the ratio of the power potential of two or more states.

Dr Medha Bisht, Assistant Professor, South Asian University, explored the ontological, epistemological and normative claims of Kautilya in “*Arthashastra* - Reflections on Thought and Theory”, arguing that the concept of order is central to its understanding. Kautilyan emphasis on the *shastras* can be perceived as serving the strategic and instrumental purposes of underlining the need for societal order in temporal terms. According to Dr Bisht, the notion of balance foregrounded in the logic of order also reinforces the normative intent of the text.

Fourth Session

The topic of the fourth session was “Kautilya & Statecraft in Pre-Modern Asia”.

Dr M S Pratibha, Associate Fellow, IDSA, compared and contextualised (through the comparative method) Kautilya and Sun-Tzu’s views on war and strategy in her paper “Kautilya and Sun-Tzu on War and Strategy: Exploratory Comparative Analysis”. She discussed the motivations of both authors as well as their respective moralities in dealing with warfare while also looking at the historical compulsions and civilisational characteristics of that time. That both Sun-Tzu and Kautilya caution against complete devastation of the enemy and arbitrarily using the army to achieve the State’s goals is a significant convergence. However, while Kautilya is mathematical about the composition of the army, the forces, the plan to attack, Sun-Tzu is poetic and cryptic. “While both are willing to use deception or force to achieve an objective, they expect the ruler to be governed by the moral order of the civilisation, in modern times to preserve the social contract between the ruler and the ruled. For Kautilya, it was about preserving the *dharma* and for Sun-Tzu, it was for maintaining the *dao*”.

Dr Hossein Zarhani, Lecturer and Senior Research Assistant at the South Asian Institute, University of Heidelberg, continued with the theme of hybridised trans-cultural flow and argued that Ziya Barani’s political theory is embedded in a complex trans-cultural flow of ideas of statecraft. According to Dr Zarhani, Ziya Barani (ca. 1285 – 1357) was one of the most influential thinkers of medieval India, yet little is known about his *Fatawa-ye jahandari*, and there are conflicting or contradictory interpretations of his concept of politics. Dr Zarhani interprets Barani’s work as hybrid political theory that draws on pre-Islamic Persian and Islamic traditions of politics as well as ancient Indian traditions of statecraft typified by Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*.

Dr Neo Peng Fu, Director, Confucius Institute, Nanyang Technological Institute, was present as a discussant during this session and he deliberated on the findings of Dr Pratibha’s research. According to Dr Fu, the paper tries to answer the “profound” question of how Kautilya and Sun-Tzu characterise the interactions between States and their people and how both authors visualise the nature of warfare for the state, and to what extent they can understand and control

the uncertainties of warfare. For Dr Fu, the findings of Dr Pratibha highlight how great minds in ancient India and ancient China thought alike. Dr Fu went on to suggest that there was an opportunity there to make a finer distinction between the philosophical concepts and historical contexts of the two authors – this would give us a perspective into the philosophical orientation of their respective works. He also points out that the *Art of Warfare*, although ascribed entirely to Sun-Tzu, could in fact be a product of collective authorship involving several philosophical scholars who were active during that period.

Fifth Session

The fifth and final session of the workshop discussed “Kautilya’s Political Realism: From East to West”.

Dr Michael Liebig compared Kautilya with Niccolo Machiavelli and shared some thoughts on Hans Morgenthau’s Theory of Political Realism. Dr Liebig argued that the structural homologies between Kautilya and Machiavelli demonstrate the possibility of ‘trans-cultural’ communication networks, and therefore it is conceivable that Kautilya influenced Machiavelli. In the case of Morgenthau, there is substantial evidence that he knew about Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* and there are evident homologies between key thought-figures in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* and in the works of Hans J Morgenthau, notably in his *Politics among Nations* (1978/1951) and *Dilemmas of Politics* (1958). Furthermore, Morgenthau – the father of 20th century Political Realism – has himself admitted that his theory is rooted in pre-modern Indian political thought.

Plenary Discussion

The workshop concluded with a plenary discussion. The following issues were discussed:

1. What is the goal of the Kautilyan State?

Is maintaining order the ultimate goal of the State, or is it Aristotelian where one helps people move from one state of consciousness to another. One way to look at it would be in static terms, or is it evolutionary where we are unfolding a form of idealism.

2. Is Kautilya a Hindu thinker or a political thinker?

According to the participants he was a political thinker who was thinking about a Hindu society.

3. What is trans-cultural flow? How is different from cross-culture?

Cross-culture is when you talk about two cultures in terms of similarities. Regardless of which culture you are talking about, there are a few concepts like religion, food, taboo, language etc. which are “common commonalities” and can be used to map different cultures in a matrix that is cross-culture. Trans-culture is a concept where you think of culture as a set of norms, some are codified while others are implicit.

4. Where do we place these texts or thinkers?

We should not restrict these thinkers to specific paradigms, instead we should understand them in terms of the analytical eclecticism put forward by Peter J Katzenstein.

5. What are some of the policy implications of this workshop?

In order to understand the dominant role of the State in South Asia, one must first understand the different philosophies of South Asia. It is these philosophical strands that will help us understand and put into perspective the strategic thinking in South Asian States.

For example, Kautilya’s text on statecraft is “essentially about conflict-management” and thus provides classic insights from a bargaining- and negotiation-standpoint into how the Indian State has dealt with counter-insurgencies (not through conflict-resolution, not through conflict-transformation, but through conflict-management).

6. Why is Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* treated with scepticism?

There is resistance to turning towards pre-modern thinkers - specifically of a different culture - from those rooted in the Eurocentric paradigm. This attitude towards pre-modern and trans-cultural sources is equally strong amongst those who nominally oppose the Eurocentric paradigm under the flag of post-modernism.

Other questions that came up but could not be discussed at length due to the shortage of the time available include:

A. Is Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* a foundational text?

B. Is Kautilya archaic or contemporary?

C. What is the heuristic methodological agenda of this workshop?

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in their capacity as partner-institutions intend to publish the conference proceedings in the form of a book.

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