

The Concept of Dharma in Kautilya's Arthashastra and its Relevance in the Present Time

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Abstract:

The concept of dharma refers to moral and ethical foundation that governs both individual and statecraft in Kautilya's Arthashastra. Arthashastra is famously a pragmatic manual on wealth (Artha) and power, Kautilya posits that all political, economic and administrative actions must operate strictly within the bounds of dharma to prevent chaos and ensure sustainable public welfare. The Arthashastra also emphasizes the state's obligation to safeguard dharma, which it defines as the virtuous behaviour expected of individuals in various social positions. This paper looks at Kautilya's Arthashastra and how the idea of dharma fits into modern life. The paper upholds that the principles of dharma, such as fairness, justice and compassion, provide a framework for ethical governance and are still important today. The paper also looks at how dharma can help policy makers to make decisions that are good for society as a whole and to help build a more fair and peaceful society.

Key Words: Dharma, Kautilya, Arthashastra, Ethical governance, Policy makers.

Introduction:

Kautilya's Arthashastra is an old Indian text. It is a guide to politics, economics and military strategy. During the Mauryan empire (321-185 BCE), an important advisor to Emperor Chandragupta Maurya named Chanakya, who was also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, wrote it. The Arthashastra shows how politics and society worked in ancient India and how complex the country's political and economic systems were.

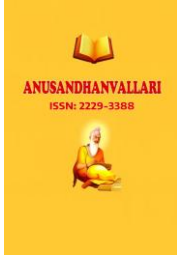
The word "dharma" which means "righteousness" or "duty", is one of the most important ideas in the Arthashastra. Dharma is a complicated idea with many different parts. It includes things like social order, ethics and justice. The idea of dharma has had a big impact on Indian society and culture. It permeates all the textures of traditional fabric. Vedas are reckoned as primary source of dharma. Smṛti-s deal exclusively with Dharma. In fact Dharmaśāstra is another name for Smṛti-s. The two great epics Ramayana and Mahābhārata explore and expand the horizons of multifaceted Dharma. Pūrvamīmāṃsā, one of the major schools of Indian Philosophy, openly states that reverential deliberation of Dharma is its main business.¹

In early Vedic literature Dharma is closely connected with the concept of Ṛta. Dharma thus meant cosmic ordinance and Ṛta stood for universal harmony. Taittirīya Āraṇyaka proclaims that Dharma is that which sustains this whole universe. Mahābhārata echoes the very same idea in the verse –

“dharāṇaddharmamityahudharmeṇa bidhṛtaḥ prajāḥ I

yaḥ syāddharāṇasanyukṭaḥ sa dharma iti niśchitaḥ II”

Mīmāṃsāsūtra defines Dharma as that which is ordained by Veda and which is conducive for attaining sensible goals.² Vaiśeṣikasūtra defines it as that which leads to happiness and final beatitude.³ The refrain 'eṣa dharmah sanātanaḥ' is often repeated in Māhābhārata. And we get many number of unilateral definitions of Dharma like



‘ahimsa paramao dharmah’, ‘ācārah paramo dharmah’ etc. Thus the concept of Dharma has made a powerful and influential impact on Indian mind.

Arthaśāstra is a work on science of polity and state craft. Kautilya defines Arthaśāstra as the science which acts as means for acquisition and protection of Earth. The reason for choosing this particular term Arthaśāstra for his work may be that artha is considered as one of the trivarga/caturvarga from very old times. Thus the word artha, which actually meant material well being of the individual, is technically defined as ‘livelihood or land inhabited by men’.⁴ Thus Kautilya purposefully brings the subject matter under the purview of caturvarga. Dharma being the first and foremost among the four puruṣārtha-s, Kautilya is seen very often trying to show that Arthaśāstra has its basis on Dharma.⁵ At the outset of the work itself, he states that all the four branches of learning viz., and daṇḍanīti as means of discriminating Dharma and Adharma.⁶

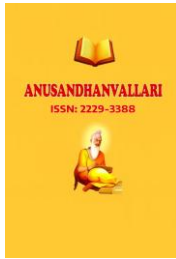
Now a question may arise: what is Dharma according to Kautilya ? At the very outset of his work Kautilya states that Traidharma is the basis and sustenance of Varṇāśramadharmā.⁷ He further enlists the duties of all varṇas and āśramas. Generally we follow that ahimsa, satya, śauca, anasūya, ānṛṣaṃsya and kṣamā are the common bounden duties of our lives and they are the basic tenets of Dharma. But Kautilya has clearly instructed a vijigīṣuto to violate all these principles. He has many a time advised clean murder as the best method of clearing the path. He always advocates foul means to test the integrity of people. Both of these are the clear violation of traditional principles.

Kautilya advocates that Rājadharmā is the sole protector of all other Dharmas and Varṇāśrama. Vyavahāra, vivāda and daṇḍa are some concepts which are exposed here in connection with Rājadharmā. The sole statement which seems to be a general definition of Dharma in the context is *atra satye sthito dharmah*. And this is a mere statement that Dharma has its basis in truth. Thus we can see that Kautilya desperately tries to establish that science of Polity has its root in Dharma, especially Trayīdharmā. But the concept of dharma seen in the vedas has got nothing to do with Varṇāśrama dharma. In early Vedic literature we find the concept of Dharma as an abstract principle which sustains this whole universe. And the later Vedic tradition has its focus on Yajñasaṃskāra. Kautilya has staunchly promotes that Varṇāśrama dharma goes against the general concept of Dharma which evolved in the post vedic period. Dharma with all its complexities, is generally accepted as the collection of all such activities of man which go to support, strengthen and promote the cosmic order of things. It includes social, economical, moral, sociological duties of a living being in a society.

When we consider the most popular and lucid meaning of the term Dharma, viz. Religion, Kautilya is seen literally exploiting or misusing other’s adherence to Dharma. In the section Yogātisandhāna and Yogavamaṇa Kautilya discusses about God and belief in God. This section on Yogātisandhāna begins with the statement: “ In the procession and worship of Gods there are many sacred and safe places where deception can be employed.”⁸ Kautilya suggests that one can make the weapons adorned in the idols of God fall on the enemy. He even suggests food poisoning on the occasions of devabali, śrāddha and pilgrimage. Again in the Yogavamaṇa section, Kautilya adduces many methods for bringing out an enemy from a hidden place. All the methods use the technique of deceiving the common mass as well as the enemy by spreading the false news of sudden appearance of god, demon or super human powers and subsequently exploiting the belief.

Kautilya repeatedly suggests the exploitation of religiosity of the masses. We get many references to temples, temple property and modes of worship. At times of emergency and recession in economy Kautilya recommends looting of temple property by the state itself. All this shows that Kautilya’s considered opinion is to encourage popular belief and religiosity of masses for exploiting it for the benefit of King and the state.

Thus it can be seen that Kautilya perceives and utilizes Dharma as a handy tool to influence human psyche and thereby to protect the state’s interests. But at the same time we can not overlook the fact that Kautilya has framed



many rules for upholding the ethical and moral values. This, in fact, goes to highlight the fact that how cleverly he administers the exploitation of the deep-rooted concept of Dharma in the Indian mind.

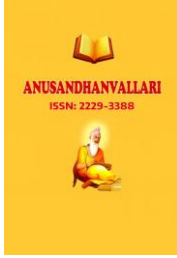
Above all Kauṭilya believes that the state is responsible for maintaining morality. It is the job of the state to ensure that there are rules and regulations in place that are fair and effective in achieving these goals. The state is responsible for enforcing these rules and regulations and penalising those who break them.

And now, the question is how the concept of dharma of Kauṭilya is relevant in the present time? Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra may have been written over two thousand years ago, but its teachings on dharma remain timeless. Some contemporary applications of Kauṭilya's dharma talks as follows:

- **Social Justice:** Dharma, one of the most important ideas in the Arthaśāstra, says that everyone should be treated fairly. At a time when discrimination and unfairness are so common, this is even more important. Governments that uphold dharma help make a fair society where everyone has the same chances of doing well?
- **Balancing Personal and Societal Interests:** Dharma offers a framework for juggling one's own needs with those of the larger community. In a world when individuality and self-interest are so prized, preserving dharma may help bring people into harmony with the greater good of society.
- **Ethical Governance:** Kauṭilya says that a leader's morality is very important if dharma is to be kept. This is more important than ever in today's society, where corruption and doing things that aren't right are so common. By acting ethically, leaders can increase trust in their institutions and help keep society stable.
- **Sustainable Development:** The dharma teachings of Kauṭilya emphasize the need of acting responsibly and making judgments that consider the long-term consequences of one's actions. This is particularly significant in the contemporary world, when climate change and environmental harm are a growing concern. Governments and organisations may strive towards sustainable development that preserves the environment and utilises natural resources responsibly if they adhere to dharma.
- **Conflict Resolution:** The dharma teachings of Kauṭilya emphasise the importance of problem-solving and diplomacy. This is crucial today, when conflicts between nations and groups are a major issue. By adhering to dharma, governments may promote peaceful and diplomatic approaches to problem-solving rather than resorting to violence and hostility.

A number of real -world examples of dharma in action from Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra show how the notion may be used in government and policy. To illustrate, below are a few examples:

- **Law and Justice:** An unbiased and fair judicial system has been emphasised in the Arthaśāstra . The king has a duty to punish the criminal and defend the innocent, regardless of their social standing or political ties. According to Kauṭilya, the judge should take into account extenuating circumstances while deciding on a sentence and ensure that the penalty is proportional to the offence.
- **Taxation Policies:** The Arthaśāstra states that the king is responsible for ensuring that taxes are collected in a fair manner and that the subjects are not subjected to excessive taxation. According to Kauṭilya, the monarch should tax his people according to their wealth and income, with special consideration given to the destitute and the crippled. The tax money should go towards improving people's lives by funding infrastructure like roads, bridges and water purification plants.



- **Foreign Relations:** The necessity of diplomacy in preserving stability is acknowledged in Arthaśāstra. Kauṭilya suggests that the monarch employ all three i.e. diplomacy, alliances and force, to safeguard the state's interests. The king is responsible for maintaining friendly ties with foreign nations.

Controversies over the idea of Dharma as illustrated in Arthaśāstra:

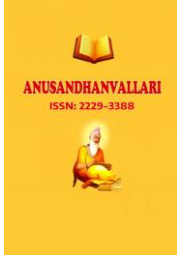
Arthaśāstra's interpretation of the concept of Dharma has been criticized. Arthaśāstra's understanding of dharma is contentious since it is vague and hence subject to abuses of authority. Controversy has arisen over the text's apparent acceptance of caste-based discrimination and the exclusion of some communities from certain rights and benefits. Others have pointed out that different cultures and societies give rise to different interpretations of Arthaśāstra's idea of dharma, which they say makes it difficult to apply universally. As an example we may say that socio-cultural factors like as caste, gender, and class might influence how dharma is implemented in government. A major complaint is that the text's utilitarian approach to government puts state interests before of citizen's rights and liberties, which some worry might lead to tyranny. The text's apparent approval of using deceit and violence to attain political ends is particularly divisive since it may be used to rationalise harmful and repressive actions. It has also been argued that the Arthaśāstra's narrow emphasis on the duties of the state leaves out more universal, ethical, and spiritual considerations. The text's focus on the king's power and authority may lead to authoritarianism, especially when used to justify repressive actions. Ultimately, these disputes and disagreements show how intricate and nuanced the notion of dharma is throughout Arthaśāstra. Although the book does give a framework for ethical government, it has been the topic of heated discussion and controversy due to its utilitarian approach, promotion of violence and deceit, and narrow view of dharma.

Conclusion:

The notion of dharma in Kautilya's Arthaśāstra offers a framework for ethical governance that is still applicable today. Its utilitarian approach to government and its promotion of violence and fraud have been the topic of criticism and controversy, but the text's larger focus on ethical behaviour and moral responsibility can not be underestimated. The continual argument and discussion over the interpretation and application of dharma in Arthaśāstra demonstrates its enduring relevance and importance in modern culture. In addition, the influence of cultural and socio economic diversity on the perception and implementation of dharma emphasises the relevance of context and view point in comprehending the concept's meaning and significance. A thorough knowledge of the notion is crucial for tackling the complex ethical and political concerns confronting contemporary society. Though the Arthaśāstra was written in an older literary style, its teachings on governance and ethics are relevant even now.

End Notes :

1. *athāto dharmajñgāsā* - Jaimini Sūtras 1.1.1
2. *Codanālokṣaṇortho dharmah* - Jaimini Sūtras 1.1.2
3. *Yatoḥvyudayaniḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmah* - Vaiśeṣikasūtras 1.1.2
4. *Manuṣyāṅg vṛttirarthaḥ manuṣyabatī vūmirityarthaḥ* - Arthaśāstra 15.1
5. *Caturbarṇāśramasyāyang lokasyācārarakṣaṇāt. Naśyatang sarvadharmāṅg rājadarmaḥ pravartakaḥ* - Arthaśāstra 3.1
6. *Catasra eba vidya iti Kautilyaḥ . Tavidharmadharmo yadvidyāttadvidyanāṅg vidyatvaṃ* - Arthaśāstra 1.1
7. *Eṣa trayīdharmāścaturṅg varṇanamaśramāṅanca svadharmasthāpanadaupakārikaḥ* - Arthaśāstra 1.3
8. *Daivatejyāyāṅg yātrāyamamitrasya bahuni pūjāgamasthānāni vaktitaḥ. Tatrasya yogamuṣjyet* - Arthaśāstra 12.5



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