

## KAUṬILYA AND GANDHI--A COMPARATIVE AND CRITICAL APPRAISAL

It is interesting to note that Kauṭilya has been very often compared to Machiavelli and both of them have been condemned as advocates of gross immorality in politics. It is further interesting to note that neither Kauṭilya's nor Machiavelli's policy has found favour with any administrator or politician worthy of his name in theory while in practice, paradoxically enough, most of them have been found to be adopting the policy of Kauṭilya or Machiavelli in some form or the other at least in some of its characteristic aspects. Keith has tried to show how Kauṭilya's contribution to Political Philosophy is nothing in comparison to that of Plato or Aristotle. "It is a very misplaced patriotism", says Keith, "which asks us to admire the *Arthaśāstra* as representing the fine 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 or the *Politics* of Aristotle."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it would be evident even to a casual reader that the following remarks made by one of the outstanding thinkers of this century regarding Machiavelli and his contributions are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to Kauṭilya.

"It is the custom to be shocked by him, and he certainly is sometimes shocking. But many other men would be equally so if they were equally free from humbug. His political philosophy is scientific and empirical, based upon his own experience of affairs, concerned to set forth the means to assigned ends, regardless of the question whether the ends are to be considered good or bad. When, on occasion, he allows himself to mention the ends that he desires, they are such as we can all applaud. Much of the conventional obloquy that attaches to his name is due to the indignation of hypocrites who hate the frank avowal of evil-doing."<sup>2</sup>

The author of *Mudrā Rākṣasa* had an illuminating insight, it seems, into both the character and policy of Kauṭilya, as is evident

from the following remarks made by Rākṣasa in a soliloquy when he sees Kauṭilya- "Aye! *Ayam sa durātmā, athavā ayam sa mahātmā Kauṭilyaḥ*" "Oh! Here is Kauṭilya an evil soul or perhaps a great saint." Bhāgūrāyaṇa in his soliloquy acknowledges Cāṇakya's policy as wonderfully multifarious (*Aho! vicitrata' rya cāṇakyanīteḥ*) Like providence that is unpredictably multidirectional Kauṭilya's policy is variegated and multi-dimensional (*Aho citrākārā niyatir iva nītir nayav-idaḥ*), says Bhāgūrāyaṇa. There is something uniquely mysterious and attractive about Kauṭilya, the man, and something peculiarly alluring and at the same time repulsive about his political thought.

It is not necessary here to highlight the common points between Machiavelli's *Prince* and Kauṭilya's *Artha Śāstra* nor is it important from my point of view to point out their difference. All this has been done so many times and in so many ways by a number of learned scholars. I would only point out that it would be unjust to compare Kauṭilya with Plato or Aristotle. The latter were philosophers of vast dimensions for whom political thought constituted only a part of their philosophical enterprise, whereas the former was primarily a political thinker whose main area of interest lies in what can be regarded as 'power-politics' in those days within a limited context. Hence, the difference in treatment of the subject-matter and their attitude towards Ethics and other branches of knowledge. *Republic* of Plato is a philosophical treatise of which the discussion on an ideal state constitutes a part only, while *Arthaśāstra* is a treatise mainly on the art of Government, its main aim being to specify the means and methods of how a state should be ruled. The comprehensiveness or otherwise of the *Arthaśāstra* is to be judged only within its specific context, that is all. It should be borne in mind that Kauṭilya was not at all a speculative thinker like Plato or Aristotle.

It would be worthwhile to compare and contrast Gandhian views with that of Kauṭilya in matters relating to means and end. *Yogaśema* and *rakṣaṇa* of the subject is being commedable end in view, this end alone would justify the means, according to Kauṭilya; but for Gandhi, no end for that matter, howsoever laudable it may be, can justify the means. Unscrupulous means should not be adopted to achieve laudable objectives, according to Gandhi, for according to him both the means and the end need to be pure for making a genuine or a real achievement possible. But is this practicable? A straight forward question indeed which, however, is difficult to answer and cannot certainly be answered

in a simple yes or no. Kauṭilya is far from being a dreamy idealist and he is concerned with practical politics, one must not, however, lose sight of this simple point.

Bhartrhari compares politics with a prostitute who goes on changing her colours from time to time as per her convenience.<sup>3</sup> According to Machiavelli, "It is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, sincere, religious, and also to be so; but you must have the mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise you may be able to change to the opposite quality."<sup>4</sup> For Russell, "Most political leaders acquire their position by causing large numbers of people to believe that these leaders are actuated by altruistic desires. It is well understood that such a belief is more readily acceptable under the influence of excitement. Brass bands, mob oratory, lynching, and war are stages in the development of the excitement."<sup>5</sup> Any means, thus, becomes acceptable in politics for attaining one's end. Kauṭilya is in favour of means such as setting fire to the houses and poisoning by the help of spies. All this is in direct opposition to those like Gandhi who with equal vehemence adhere to *ahimsā* and advocate that politics should be guided and controlled by ethical considerations. Experience, however, shows that Governments of all countries take resort to expediency rather than ethics while dealing with their own people or even with the Governments of other countries in matters concerning state and administration. Elaborate spying system is approved in national as well as international politics. K. Satchidananda Murty, an eminent Indian Philosopher, in his recent lectures delivered on '*Pañca Śīla & Pañca Tantra*' has raised a very significant question as follows: "Reflections on *Pañca Tantra* makes one ask, has any state of considerable power ever been established at any time, any where without the use of force?"<sup>6</sup> This is a very important point to consider *vis a vis* the principle of *ahimsā* which has been made much of in the political philosophy of Gandhi. Murty without any hesitation points out elsewhere that "Gandhi knew very little about the power of Fear and Terror which could make human beings incapable of doing good in return for evil, or of doing anything at all".<sup>7</sup> Martin Buber in his letter addressed to Mahātmā Gandhi in 1939 had expressed his doubts about the efficacy of *Satyāgraha* in the regime of a Hitler. Buber, with all his respect for Gandhi, pointed out in no uncertain terms, "An affective stand may be taken in the form of non-violence against unfeeling human being

in the hope of gradually bringing them thereby to their senses; but a diabolic universal steam-roller cannot thus be withstood".<sup>8</sup> Buber writes from his own experience to Gandhi, "It does not seem to me convincing when you base your advice to us to practise *Satyāgraha* in Germany on these similarities of circumstances. In the five years which I myself spent under the present regime, I observed many instances of genuine *satyāgraha* among the Jews.... Such actions, however, apparently exerted not the slightest influence on their opponents".<sup>9</sup> Can it be said with sufficient reason that, whether it was Buber in particular or Jews in general, they were all too impatient with *Satyāgraha* and *ahimsā* as the instruments for change of heart of their opponents? This, however, cannot be proved this way or the other in as much as human situation is not uniform and varies from place to place, time to time, and also from one context to the other.

In view of this Kauṭilya's stand cannot be set aside so lightly as one would like to do if one adheres to some sort of value based politics governed by ethical considerations. It is not true that Kauṭilya was entirely opaque to the significance or even the importance of ethics in the daily life of kings and his subjects. Kauṭilya's reference to *Mātsya nyāya* in course of his discussion regarding the necessity of punishment shows his concern for protection of the weak subjects against the aggressive tendency of the strong. Just as big fish devours the small ones, the strong would devour the weak people unless the latter are protected by a king through punishment or *daṇḍa*. In the words of Kauṭilya, "*Apraṇīto hi mātsya nyāyam udbhāvayati | Bālīyān abalaṁ hi grasate daṇḍadharābhāve*".<sup>10</sup> This shows how and to what extent Kauṭilya was concerned with the protection of the weak as against the aggression by the strong. The king is advised to protect the weak through *daṇḍa* or punishment and to that extent the king is endowed with virtues that are certainly ethically laudable. Kauṭilya cannot, therefore, be condemned as being opaque to ethics altogether. Moreover, Kauṭilya is aware that a king is genuinely interested and engaged in the welfare of all creatures, would be loved and adored by one and all. That is why he is full of praise for such a king who is *Rājarsi*, both a king and a *Rsi*, according to him. Kauṭilya points out clearly that such a king gets a unique rank because of these rare virtues of his. In the words of Kauṭilya himself, "*Vidyā vinīto hi rājā prajānāṁ vinaye rataḥ, ananyam padaviṁ bhuṅkte sarvabhūta hite rataḥ*". This shows high sensitivity to morals recommended by Kauṭilya in day to day politics

of kings *vis a vis* their subjects. Moreover, kings or the *Rājārṣis* are advised to follow the pursuit of *kāma* only in so far as it does not conflict with *dharma* and *artha*. “*Dharmārthāvirodhena Kāma seveta na niḥśukhaḥ syāt/Samaṁ vā trivargam anyonyānubandhanam.*” Although it is true that *artha* is the main objective according to Kautilya (*Artha eva pradhāna iti Kautilyah/*), still he does not lose sight of *dharma* or *kāma* altogether. Once the importance of *dharma* is acknowledged with that of *kāma* and *artha*, ethics finds a footing in Kautilya’s framework, as I understand it.

It is true, however, that cruel and immoral means are recommended by Kautilya for the protection of the State and the Governments against the enemies and the traitors, when the state is in difficulty. These are forbidden in case of law-abiding citizens and also in normal times. “*Evam duṣṣeṣv adharmikeṣu ca varteta, netareṣu*”.”

This is an important point emphasised by Kautilya which one should not forget in this connection. If ‘*Ārjavam hi Kuṭileṣu na nītiḥ*’ is accepted, if it is not advisable to be simple and straight-forward in face of some one who is crooked, Kautilya’s policy can not but be appreciated in this light. As a matter of fact, virtues like *ahiṁsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *anasītyā* (freedom from malice), *anṛśamīya* (compassion) and *kṣamā* (forgiveness) are recommended for one and all irrespective of their *varṇa* and *āśrama* by Kautilya *Sarveṣām ahiṁsā satyam śaucam anasītyanṛśamīyam kṣamā ca l’* In view of this a re-appraisal of Kautilya’s policy is of paramount importance for eradicating some of our misconceptions in this regard.

The problem, however, is not so simple. Nothing succeeds like success in politics, and once unscrupulous means are given approbation for achieving one’s end in politics there can be no end to this and it would be hard, if not impossible, to check the immoral tendencies in our day to day life also. Under the circumstance, instructions to adhere to the traditional morality or even morality of whatever sort it may be could be obeyed more in violation than in practice and ultimately a time would come when everyone, irrespective of his being in or outside politics, would have a tendency to pay a mere liployalty, if at all, to morals and values. That would be very dangerous state-of-affair indeed. If full-fledged and one-opinted devotion to *ahiṁsā*, as propounded by Gandhi, may not be practically useful, in affaris of the State or the

Government, adherence to Kautilya's policy of adopting all sorts of unfair means by the ruler for the sustenance or protection of the state could end in sheer disaster in our public and private life as far as morality is concerned. The reason is very simple. Once it is allowed that any means is alright in state-craft, the ruler would have a tendency to consolidate his position at all costs and would be paying a mere lip-loyalty to the idea of protecting the State from the evils inside or outside itself. Self-protection, self-aggrandisement would then be the motto for the ruler and all sorts unscrupulous means would be adopted by the ruler for achieving his own end rather than the good of the state. Since immoral means are already sanctioned and highly immoral practices are not only permitted but deliberately perpetrated for achieving political ends, the same means and the same practices would be both permitted and perpetrated for achieving personal ends. My point is that there is no end to immorality and once this is allowed it can go to any extent. As a matter of fact, all sorts of unscrupulous means and immoral practices have been taken resort to and are being practised even now in world-politics in the name of love of one's country, internal and external security, progressivism and what not. And once this is encouraged it would have a tendency of percolating and infiltrating into the daily life of the public. Individual morality cannot be kept separate from unscrupulous state-policies or ideologies in spite of the best efforts of an able statesman, for ordinary men have natural tendency to follow the examples of their masters. '*Yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhas tattad evetaro janah | Sa yat pramānam kurute lokas tad anuvartate*' as it has been aptly stated in the *Bhagavadgītā* (III.21) Ultimately this may lead to the utter destruction of the state, Government and the ruler as well.

If value-based politics may be useless, politics without morals could be self-destructive. This is the *paradox of politics*. Morals may not work and immoral tendencies cannot be checked at any particular level, according to the sweet will of the politician; this is the paradoxical situation in which practical politics finds itself at the very outset, and there seems to be no escape from this situation. So, what happens in practical politics is well-known; there is a constant swinging movement, so to say, in politics. Sometimes power-politics in which adoption of unscrupulous means is sanctioned without any hesitation takes the upperhand, while value-based politics is undermined or is at best paid

a mere lip-loyalty. At other times, the wind seems to blow in favour of value-based politics, specially when the ruler and the people are completely fed up by politics which has become too muddy and are compelled by circumstance to lean in favour of morals in politics. My assessment is that neither a Gandhi nor a Kautilya is self-sufficient for politics; politics has to go on experimenting with one after the other or even at times one along with the other, and nobody can predict at the outset if this or that would succeed in the long run. Even great political pundits cannot predict what would be the final result of such experiment, for the result is likely to differ according to different contests. Success and failure in one context cannot guarantee similar success and failure in another context, for the simple reason that the uniformity of condition cannot be ensured in such cases.

As in all human affairs, in affairs of the state also I do not think that there is any golden path in an absolute sense. If Kautilya's policy has had its day and has succeeded in affairs of the state, so also has Gandhian method succeeded in its own way. If there are cases where Gandhian method has failed, instances can also be cited where adoption of a policy like that of Kautilya has produced mere monsters trying to devour each other by hook or by crook. So, we cannot say that one is superior to the other, nor can we say that one is merely complementary to the other. There is nothing like the perfect or the best policy in politics; policies need to be adopted, experimented upon, promoted and undermined according to circumstances that arise from time to time differing also from place to place. As far as Kautilya is concerned, we must admit that his insight into the workings of human mind in matters of state-craft, his observations on the practice of espionage etc. are simply penetrating. In any case Kautilya's policy has not lost its relevance even in the so-called modern times in which we live, move and have our being. It is being put to practice even in our times in various manner by different Governments of the world who may not otherwise be acquainted with or even be aware of *Arthaśāstra* as a treatise. Politics being a practical affair, nothing, it seems, becomes outdated in politics so long as it works. We are only to distinguish works of political wisdom from those of mediocrity or of mere drudgery, and *Arthaśāstra*, whether one agrees with it or not, is certainly a work of great political sagacity.

Consideration of morals, of values has always been there alongside the play of power-politics and it would also continue to be there. An astute politician with rare insight alone would be able to maintain a balance between the two which is an unavoidable necessity if the society is not to degenerate and disintegrate. Our normal day to day transaction (*lokavyavahāra*) has been described as a mixture of truth and falsehood by Ācārya Śaṅkara in his *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya* in a specific sense and with a specific purpose.<sup>12</sup> From another point of view, it appears to me that it also is applicable in the field of politics. It is a part of the duty of an astute as well as a patriotic politician who is worthy of his job to ensure that there should not be any excess of falsehood at any point whatsoever. As a matter of fact, I should think that political astuteness itself consists precisely in this, i.e., continuing to be in power as long as possible without allowing falsehood to take the upperhand in any case.

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8. Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way*, G.F. Estey and D.A. Hemter (Eds.), *Non-violence (U.S.A., 1971)*, p. 146.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Kautilya, *Arthaśāstra*, 1.4.
11. *Arthaśāstra*, 5.2.69.
12. Cf. *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya* (Introduction to the Commentary on *Brahma Sūtras*).  
 "Satyāṇṛte mithunīkṛtya aham idam mamedam itī naisargiko'yaṁ lokavyayaḥ hūrah"

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