

# CHANAKYA: AN ACTIVIST TYPE OF MYSTIC!

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**Abstract:** Gurudev R. D. Ranade has elucidated the characteristic features of a mystic/saint; the element of universality, the intellectual aspect, the emotional aspect, the moral aspect and the intuitional aspect. Within the moral aspect Ranade mentions two types of mystics – ‘the quietist type’ and ‘the activist type’. There are very few mystics who have been consciously and explicitly been ‘activist type of mystics/saints’, viz. Joan of Arc, St. Mother Teresa, Shah Wali Allah, Al-Ghazali, St. Francis Xavier, Confucius, Ramdas Swami and many more. In this paper I have made an attempt to compare Chanakya’s ‘life and philosophy’ with those mystics/saints of the world who have been ‘a complete activist type’. The paper will bring out the importance of his two major works – the *Arthashashtra* and the *Niti Shashtra*; where we can see that Chanakya himself remaining an ascetic wanted one ‘*Akhanda Bharat*’, himself remaining detached from this mundane luxuries wanted to give a better and sustainable polity to the people. A better governance, ethically run business, aphorisms of old *shastras* to be revived in present (then) context and a complete moral and humane life. The paper will also critique his approach towards social, economic and political philosophy that he set for ideal society. But overall, Chanakya can be viewed from Gurudev Ranade’s perspective: An Activist Type of Mystic/Saint.

Key words: *Arthashashtra*, *Niti Shashtra* and *active mystic*.

Chanakya: “The fragrance of flowers spreads only in direction of the wind. But the goodness of a person spreads in all directions.”

And

“Fish, tortoise, and birds bring up their young by means of sight, attention and touch; so do saintly men afford protection to their associates by the same means.”<sup>1</sup>

These quotes (and many more) by Chanakya, also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta (c. 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) – a great economist, philosopher, royal advisor, a jurist and known to be a great teacher – suggest that he is an ‘activist type of a mystic’.

Was he one? The paper is a humble attempt to prove that he was one “activist type of a mystic”.

Who is a mystic? To be more precise in our context, who is a theistic mystic?

“The word *mysticism* came from Greek *μωω*, (pronunciation - ‘meow’) meaning ‘to conceal’. In the Hellenistic world, ‘mystical’ referred to ‘secret’ religious rites and rituals. In early Christianity the term came to refer to “hidden” allegorical interpretations of scriptures and to hidden presences, such as that of Jesus at the Eucharist. Only later did the term begin to denote “mystical theology”, which included direct experience of the divine. Typically, mystics, theistic or not, see their mystical experience as part of a larger undertaking aimed at human transformation and not as the terminus of their efforts.”<sup>2</sup>

The above quotation signifies that mysticism is dependent upon mystics’ intuitions, insight or is claimed that s/he has a direct intuitive perception of “the divine”; here we emphasize on “mystical theology” or “theistic mysticism”. The theistic mystics firmly believe that his/her experience is so unique that it cannot be described, defined, explained or demonstrated.

According to Gurudev Ranade, mystics not only in India, but of all religions and all over the world, opened the gateway to the Divine for all without any distinction of caste, class, race and gender. The mystics in India made ‘the Divine experience’ accessible to all. And this approach in life was brought by these mystics very naturally, like a flow of a river; this flow had come about with morality as an important step in this ladder. The approach was decentralized one and is open to all. As Gurudev Ranade says, “Before, however, mysticism could be brought from being the private possession of the few to be the property of all, it must pass through the intermediate stage of the moral awakening of the people to a sense of duty, which would not be incompatible with philosophical imagination on the one hand and

democratization of mystical experience on the other,.....”<sup>3</sup> So he goes further to give some distinct characteristics of a mystic. Ranade notes five major characteristics of a mystics, they are:

a. All the mystics of different religions of the world have some commonality in their mystical experience. Therefore mystical experience has the element of universality.

b. Mystics are not random thinkers or super or abnormal in psychological sense. But they are intellectuals with sober personality. Therefore mystical experiences possess intellectual aspect as well.

c. The intellectual aspect of mystical experience is not hard core rationality; but is backed by emotional aspect that gives it humane touch. These emotions are refined and pure.

d. But as seen before a mystical experience has a moral backing. Without morality a mystic is actually not a mystic according to Ranade. As mentioned in *Enneads* 6.9.9 by Plotinus, a great mystic, ‘The vision is not to be regarded as unfruitful. In this state the perfect soul begets – like God Himself – beautiful thoughts and beautiful virtues.’ (1982) Moral life goes along mystical life. For example Sant Jnāneśvara talks of high moral values and virtues in *Jnāneśvarī*. In moral aspect – Ranade distinguishes two types of mystics – “the quietist type” and “the activist type”; but one thing is made explicitly clear by Ranade that whatever type a mystic may be – a mystic walks on a moral path.

e. The intuitional aspect according to Ranade is the most important criterion among the above four criteria. This personal aspect of mysticism is the ‘spiritual realization’ of a mystic. It is the first-hand ‘intimate, intuitive apprehension of God.’ (1982) This personal experience is judged by mystic himself or herself.

Considering the above elaboration on mysticism and mystic; the following question is: Is Chanakya a mystic; more specifically “the activist type of a mystic”? And my answer to this question is positive. Yes, Chanakya is “an activist type of a mystic”. Taking into the consideration Chanakya’s ‘life and philosophy’ with those mystic/saints of the world, we find Chanakya was ‘a complete mystic’; having the element of universality that is found among mystic to see to the welfare of all, highly intellectual, emotional in nature – pure and refined, complete moral approach towards life and having intuitional aspect that is very obvious as we start reading his *Niti Shastra*.

Chanakya’s two major works – the *Arthashastra* and the *Niti Shastra*; where we can see that Chanakya himself remaining an ascetic wanted one ‘*Akhanda Bharat*’, himself remaining detached from this mundane luxuries wanted to give a better and sustainable polity to the people. A better governance, ethically run business, aphorisms of old *shastras* to be revived in present (then) context and a complete moral and humane life.

As we all know, he was a well known teacher (apart from a political advisor, economist, philosopher and writer of political treatise – the *Arthashastra* – broadly on Economics); and counselor in the royal court of Chandragupta Maurya; and later to his son Bindusara. It is believed that he took education in Takshashila and was appointed as teacher in Economics and Political Science. *Arthashastra* comprises of ethics, the nature of government body, market and trade, laws of criminal court, society and economics, most importantly “nature of peace”, and “the duties and obligations of the ruler”. It is amazing that the ‘*Arthashastra*’ also includes mineralogy, agriculture, wildlife and forest. Therefore, it covers the overall “life” in general and “relationship of human being to nature and one human being to another human being” in particular. (2017)

Along with *Arthashastra*, Chanakya is well known for his “*Chanakya Niti*” – the *Chanakya Niti Shastra*. Often he is remembered as a revengeful person who toppled the reign of Dhana Nanda believed to be a wicked king. So by writing *Arthashastra* and *Niti Shastra* he wanted to inscribe the paradigmatic rules for a king, his conduct, the strategy to protect his kingdom and himself from his enemies, to maintain law and order in his kingdom, and many more prescriptions.

Now the point is – is he the same Chanakya, a shrewd Brahmin, full of vengeance and to accomplish his goal he overtook the Nanda Empire with help of Chandragupta? Is it the only way Chanakya has to be seen

and judged? Can't there be another perspective to it? If an ascetic who thinks only of welfare of the people and dreamt of "Akhandā Bharat" – should he be deemed to be judged to be a revengeful statesman?

Therefore we need to see different versions of Chanakya's life and philosophy; and then deduce the fact that was he 'an activist type of mystic' instead!

Considering Chanakya's *Arthashastra*, one may be apprehensive about him being a mystic. But when one concentrates on his *Niti Shastra*, it tallies with the characteristic features of a mystic as put forth by Gurudev Ranade. Not all of it but some of the verses definitely say that he was indeed a mystic with vision for future *Akhandā Bharat*. It is also well known that in world religions, the activist mystics have played a pivotal role in the welfare of the lives of common people and putting the suppressed masses on a high pedestal.

Basically, according to Trautmann there are four versions of Chanakya's life.<sup>4</sup> They are:

1. Buddhist Version (*Mahavamsa* and its commentary *Vamsatthappakasini* in Pali)
2. Jain Version (*Parishishtaparvan* by Hemchandra)
3. Kashmiri Version (*Kathasaritsagar* by Somadeva, *Brihat – Katha – Manjari* by Ksemendra) and
4. Vishakhadatta's Version (*Mudrarakshasa*, a Sanskrit play by Vishakhadatta).

One point that is common in all four versions is that Dhana Nanda, the king, insulted Chanakya in his court; so Chanakya takes his revenge by dethroning the king and establishes Chandragupta as the king. But the nuances of this version reveals that softer, the compassionate and empathetic aspect of Chanakya.

The Buddhist version which is in Pali has portrayed Chanakya as a Brahmin full of vengeance towards Nanda king Dhana as he insulted him. So Chandragupta was installed as king by Chanakya with his wit and intelligence.

The Jaina version is not much different from the Buddhist one. But according to Lewis B. Rice, in Jain text known as *Rajavali-Katha* – in the end when Chandragupta took to vanaprasthashrama and then followed by sanyasahrama, Chanakya accompanied him to the forest; while Bindusara, Chandragupta's son was made king.<sup>5</sup>

In Kashmiri version, we find Chanakya was told by Shakatala (a former minister to king) for his insult in the king's court. So in Ksemendra's version of Chanakya's life, Chanakya dethrones the King Yogananda (who resides in the body of Nanda) and installs Chandragupta as king. After taking his revenge, he leaves for forest as an ascetic.

In Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*, a Sanskrit play, there is a constant and subtle combat between Rakshasa (the prime minister of Nanda); Chanakya plots to dethrone Nanda, and Chandragupta, who is son of king Nanda's lesser queen is installed as king; and ultimately seeing Rakshasa's loyalty towards his friend Chandanadasa – shows mercy on Rakshasa, appoints him as a prime minister of Chandragupta and retires to forest.

These are the four versions of Chanakya's life according to Trautmann. In all, the different versions of Chanakya's life, portrays him as man who is out to take revenge. Then the question is how can he be called a mystic?

But while reading *Niti Shastra* (by Chanakya) translated as "the Science of Morality" or "Ethics", one cannot help but think how a person of highest knowledge who thinks of people's welfare, be a shrewd and wicked Brahmin? In all four versions – Chanakya is portrayed as an ascetic up to the end, take up vanaprasthashrama and ends up in sanyasahrama; why would he write *Arthashastra* and *Niti Shastra*, meant as *loksamgraha* (found in the *Bhagavad Gita*) where he speaks of duties and remain detached from mundane pleasures - be a person with revenge? Aren't these signs of "an activist type of a mystic"?

Like a mystic, that too theistic mystic, Chanakya notes in *Niti Shastra* that at individual level:

"Riches, vitality, life, body – all are fickle and fey; only Dharma (duty) is constant and everlasting." (Verse 11)

“God’s abode is not the idols of wood, stone or earth. He dwells only in feelings. (Verse 06)

This reminds of Monism and Pantheism. As Ranade mentions that there is a difference between a “sant” (saint) and a “bhakta” (devotee). A sant aspires to be one with the One, the Ultimate Reality; but a devotee, a bhakta is always separated from his Bhagawaan (his/her Lord). Though, in the end both aspire for “Ultimate Realization”. Again mystic like Kabir or Gurunanak are reminded to us.

Further Chanakya says,

“But, even if one puts one’s faith in the idols of gods made of metal, wood or stone and worships them with total devotion, one is awarded with the desired result.” (Verse 08)

Here, he with open arms welcomes the bhaktas, the devotees that is typical of ‘theistic mysticism’.

In another aphorism, he says,

“Anger is death, Lust is (the river of hell) Vaitarani, Knowledge is the cow of plenty and Satisfaction is (the divine orchard) Nandanvan.” (Verse 36)

This reminds of Sant Ramdas Swami (17<sup>th</sup> Century) (an activist saint from Maharashtra) who was a spiritual Guru of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaja, who said, “Some practice penance with their hands held up; but as these are unable to avoid lust and anger, they cannot have the rest of final deliverance.”<sup>7</sup>

Saint Joan (of Arc) (1412-1431), another activist mystic who was canonized as a Roman Catholic Saint, a mystic from France who fought for King Charles VII against the English army; and was burnt alive by the English at the age of 19, she was declared a martyr and as late as 1920 she was canonized as Saint. As noted by Mary Gordon, “We would like to believe that youth, ardor, audacity, courage, and natural intelligence will prevail against bureaucratic power and corruption. In Joan’s case, there is an important sense in which they did not. She died, after all, at her enemies’ hands. But she stands for the triumph of the invisible over the visible, of the potency of pure intention, of acts that shimmer and endure beyond the life of the actor or the efficacy of the acts..... We need her as the heroine of our better selves.”<sup>8</sup>

While comparing with St. Joan, Chanakya too, remaining an ascetic, collected a huge army, groomed Chandragupta, actually chosen from nowhere, and fought against the corrupt rule of Dhana Nanda. In the book *Maxims of Chanakya*, V. K. Subramanian mentions from *Chanakyastras – Ethical Roots* –

“Righteousness is the root of happiness. //1//  
Wealth is the root of righteousness. //2//  
The state is the root of wealth. //3//  
Victory over senses is the root of the state. //4//  
Humility is the root of sense control. //5//  
Worship of the elders is the root of humility. //6//  
Wisdom results from the worship of elders. //7//  
With wisdom one can prosper. //8//  
The prosperous one becomes the victorious one. //9//  
The victorious one attains all the riches. //10//”<sup>9</sup>

Who can speak such *Mahavakyas*; I think only a mystic can.

Another great mystic that can be compared to Chanakya is the great Confucius (551 BC-479BC). He was, like Chanakya, a teacher, politician, philosopher and writer/editor. His philosophy included individual and governmental ethics, family and societal values, justice, perseverance and sincerity. His well known “Golden Rule” is, “Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.”<sup>10</sup> Confucian values comprises of:

“The significance of education in cultivating the individual, enriching the society, and contributing to the political order.

The role of government in establishing a political bureaucracy for ruling large numbers of people; and

The value of history as an element of civilizational continuity and moral rectification.”<sup>11</sup>

Confucius seems to be very similar to Chanakya’s *Niti Shastra* where he aspired to have order and harmony in individual’s life, in their families and the empire. Chanakya said,

“The Secret task of a king is to strive for the welfare of his people incessantly.”

“The happiness of the commoners is the happiness of the king. Their welfare is his welfare. A king should never think of his personal interest or welfare, but should try to find his joy in the joy of his subjects.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Niti Shastra* he says, “Mother, Father, Teacher and Guest are perceivable Deities.”<sup>13</sup>

The Asian values were upheld by Chanakya. Like Confucius, he spoke of good governance, good polity with ethical norms, where corruption has no place. Like any mystic Chanakya always emphasized on spirituality. He believed that any society should not be motivated only for material gains. He also noted that the leader plays a pivotal role in state; where the leader should concentrate on the “welfare” of the society. The greatest part of his polity was not to postpone justice, as he believed ‘justice delayed is justice denied’. So overall his political, economic and social philosophy promulgated “dharma”. And the leader, who is a model for the society, must be a firm believer in moral order.

Like Chanakya, Shah Waliullah Dehlavi (1703-1762), who is considered a mystic with study of sociology, history, parapsychology, study of Quran and Revolution Fiqh military strategy, who also believed that Islam can successfully and peacefully solve the problems that are social, moral, economic and political in nature. He spoke about -

“Ikhbat: total submission before the Lord.....

Taharah: cleanliness and purity of body, dress and environment as a necessary reflection of the inner purity of the soul:

Samahah: generosity and benevolence.....;

Justice and equity: this is the cardinal virtue, according to the Quran, is the most essential norm and a basic principle of human association.”<sup>14</sup>

In similar fashion, Chanakya too believed in *Vedas* and *Upanishads*; and in fact made it public, breaking the private study of it in Gurukul. He practically implemented the knowledge of the scriptures and made it practically accessible by his living example.

Corresponding to the philosophy of Shah Waliullah Dehlavi, Chanakya says in *Niti Shastra*,

“Chapter 1, Verse 1 – Humbly bowing down before the almighty Lord Sri Vishnu, the Lord of the three worlds, I recite maxims of the science of politics and political ethics (*Niti*) selected from the various *shastra*.

Chapter 5 Verse 12 – There is no disease (so destructive) as lust; no enemy like infatuation; no fire like wrath; and no happiness like spiritual knowledge.

Chapter 7 Verse 20 – Purity of speech, of the mind, of the senses, and a compassionate heart are needed by one who desires to rise to the divine platform.”<sup>15</sup>

Going back to introduction we find when Gurudev Ranade mentions the criteria of mystical experience; all these reflect from Chanakya’s *Arthashastra* and *Niti Shastra*. No doubt there are many verses those from feminist point of view sounds derogatory; but going back to Chanakya who spoke of “dharma” as most important in one’s life; one finds him to be an activist type of a mystic. Of course, the paper is just a humble attempt to see Chanakya’s life and philosophy from the activist type of a theistic mystic – that which is not abstract, idealistic and unrealistic but pure, practical and absolutely realistic.

In the end I would like to quote Chanakya and conclude: “A man is great by deed, not by birth”; this again is a popular statement of all the mystics of the world.

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