

Kautilya's Relevance in 21st Century

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Abstract: Kautilya has discussed various topics on administration, politics and economy, it is a book of law and a treatise on running a country, which is relevant even today. His ideas remain popular to this day in India. He provided valuable basis for economic science. It contains very useful economic ideas on foreign trade, taxation, public expenditure, agriculture and industry. Good governance and stability are inextricably linked. If rulers are responsive, accountable, removable, recallable, there is stability.

Keywords – Culture, Governance, Kautilya, Strategy, Economy .

Introduction

Kautilya, or Chanakya, was a famous teacher at Taxila University (near Peshawar, in modern Pakistan). Following the death of Alexander the Great, Kautilya planned and coordinated the liberation of North Western India by his protégé-Chandragupta Maurya. With Kautilya's shrewd guidance, Chandragupta overthrew the existing rule of the Nanda Kings and founded the Mauryan Empire in 322 BCE. Chandragupta, who ruled from 324 to 301 BCE, thus earned the title of a liberator and the first emperor of *Bharata* or India.²

Kautilya was thus the brains behind the establishment of the Mauryan Empire. He went on to compile the *Arthasāstra* as a guide for the Mauryan Emperors. The treatise exerted a profound influence on the development of political ideas in traditional India.³

The Mauryan Empire, underpinned and guided by Kautilya's strategic thought, existed from 326 BCE to 184 BCE, a duration of approximately 143 years.⁴ One of Chandragupta's most famous successors was Emperor Asoka (see figure 1). Asoka's empire based out of Pataliputra (today known as Patna in eastern India) included large portions of modern day India, Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.⁵

The figure provides a historical reference for Kautilya and depicts Kautilya to be in the same "league" as other eminent ancient and medieval strategists.

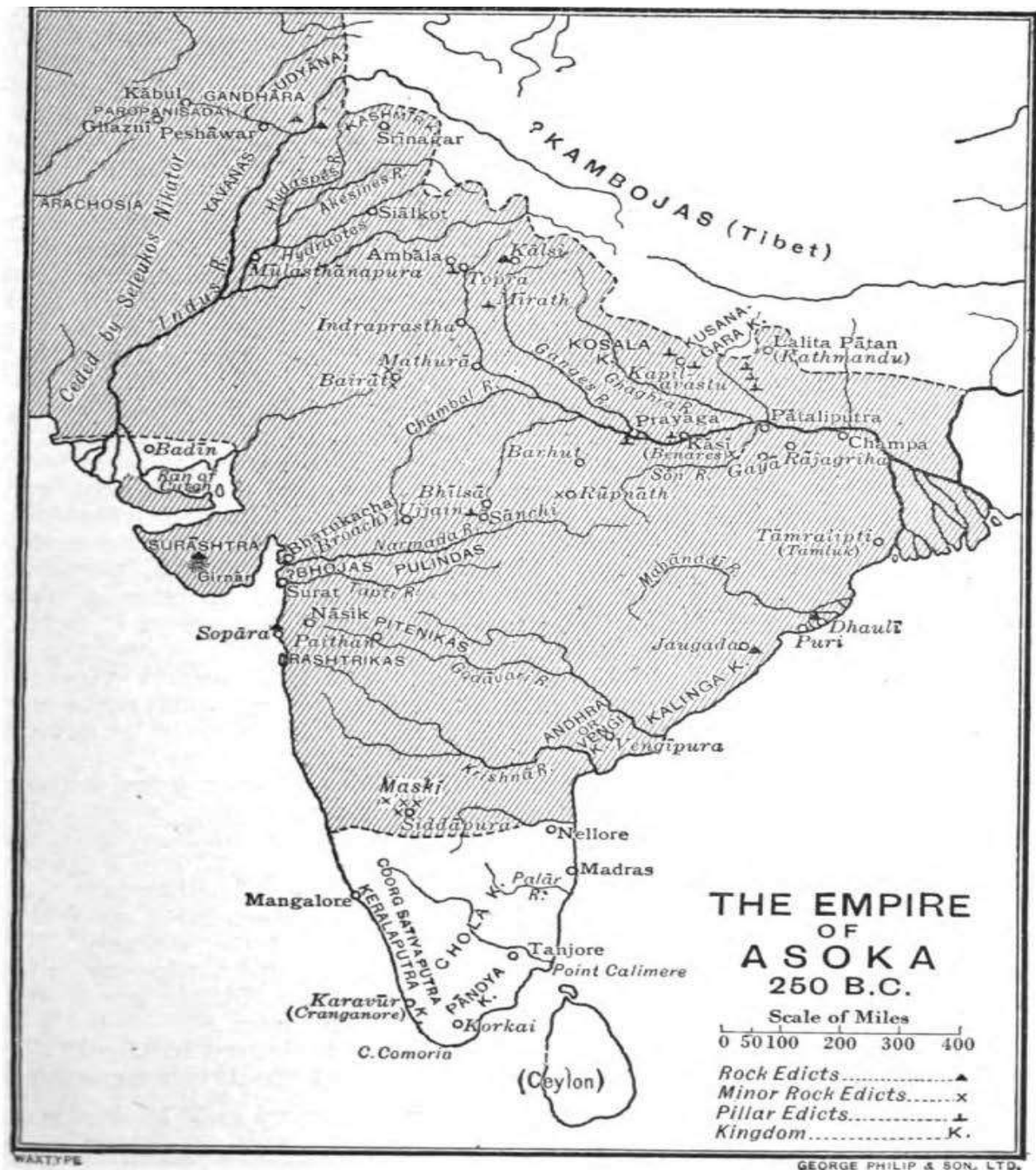


Figure 1. The Mauryan Empire during Emperor Asoka's reign

Source: Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India, from the Earliest Times to the End of 1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), 105, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015024361977>.

Relevance of Arthshashtra in modern time

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta is one of the most famous Indian political thinkers. Though he lived a long time ago, certain principles from his theory are still relevant in today's framework. The original book, written in Sanskrit, discusses theories and principles of governing a state. Kautilya demonstrated an extremely vital imperative: governance, polity, politics, and progress have to be linked to the welfare of the people. Having discussed some economic ideas of Kautilya, it can be said that even the terminology employed in Arthshashtra may have changed but the nature and role of state in the economic system seem persistent in all settings. If not, there is instability. This is even more relevant in the present democratic setup. Heavy taxation should be avoided. If tax rates are high, public will not be willing to pay the tax and find out the ways of tax evasion. Low rate of taxation will yield more revenue to the state. He was fully aware that terms of trade were not just depending on economics but also on various parameters. There is no autonomous mechanism that will ensure that a nation would benefit from trade in the absence of certain safeguards and policy measures. Social welfare is the centre point of Kautilya's economic ideas.

The State was required to help the poor and helpless and to be proactive in contributing to the welfare of its citizens. The emphasis that Kautilya gave to human capital formation is relevant in current times because development is not possible without human capital accumulation. Apart from these ideas there are a number of things in Arthashastra which is very relevant such as conservation of natural resources. Arthashastra provides much basic knowledge about economics, and several of his ideas are still relevant.

The Arthashastra, a treatise on polity, economic activity, and administration, both public and private, written from the perspective of ideal, but pragmatic governance norms and in a holistic framework, was lost to us for centuries. This wonderful body of knowledge needs to be brought to the attention of the people.

The work brings out clearly the relevance of Kautilya's thoughts and teachings to contemporary times not only in India, but throughout the world. The relevance becomes more pertinent as Kautilya's interdisciplinary work basically meets the need of creating a strong and centralised administration, which is truly benevolent to the people. Good governance in Kautilya's literature is aimed at fulfilling the welfare of the people. "In the happiness of the King's subjects lies his happiness, in their welfare, his welfare. Whatever pleases him personally, he shall not consider as good, but whatever makes his subjects happy, he shall consider good." The jargon related to Human Resource Management was not prevalent then, but its essence was widely practised in Kautilya's times. "The King should look to the bodily comforts of his servants by providing such emoluments as can infuse in them the spirit of enthusiasm to work. He should not violate the course of righteousness and wealth. Thus, he shall not only maintain his servants, but also increase their subsistence and wages in consideration of their learning and work."

Kautilya believed in a welfare state, flexible labour policy, and constructive administrative procedures. Efficient administration is basic for good governance. Good governance should avoid extreme decisions and extreme actions. Kautilya recommends a strict code of conduct for himself and for the administrators. This code of conduct is useful and applicable to modern executives.

The concept of trusteeship was not in fashion in the times of Kautilya. But what Kautilya preached was the highest form of trusteeship as advocated by Gandhiji – "For good governance, all administrators, including the King, should be considered the servants of the people." They were paid for the service they rendered, and not for their ownership of anything.

The main role of a leader is to lead by example. All the attributes spelt out by Kautilya are expected even from the present day leaders. In fact, the working and motivation of the leaders from various segments of the economy determine the well-being of the inhabitants of the economy.

Endnotes

1 Charles Waldaren *Kautilya's Arthashastra: A Neglected Precursor to Classical Economics*, Journal Indian Economic Review, Vol 31, 1996

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3 Sukanto Bhattacharya *From Kautilya to Benford – Trends in Forensic and Investigative Accounting*

4 L.N. Rangarajan *Kautilya: The Arthashastra* (Penguin India, 1992).

5 R. Syamasastri (Trans.) *Kautilya: Arthashastra* (Bangalore: Government Press, 1915, 51-185)

6 Roger Boesche, Rowan *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra* (Littlefield Publishing Inc)