

Ancient Wisdom and Renaissance Realpolitik: Machiavelli Meets Kautilya

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Is it better to be feared or loved? This question lies at the heart of two of the most influential treatises on statecraft and governance.

Written by Niccolo Machiavelli and published posthumously in 1532, *The Prince* remains one of the most potent political treatises to have ever been written in Western history. He was a Florentine diplomat and philosopher, and his book is a practical yet much-debated piece of advice on political leadership and the dynamics of power. His background as a diplomat witnessing the turbulent politics of Renaissance Italy heavily influenced his perspectives. The book primarily argues that the ends justify the means for rulers seeking to maintain power and stability, regardless of any moral considerations. This review aims to analyse *The Prince* through a comparative lens with Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft and military strategy. By juxtaposing Machiavelli's pragmatic approach with Kautilya's, this review aims to outline the similarities and differences in political thought across different cultures and historical contexts.

Where *The Prince* is a work of modern political philosophy, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, composed in the 4th century BCE, is a seminal text of political theory and statecraft. Kautilya, otherwise known as Chanakya, provides a comprehensive treatise on statecraft, economics, military strategy, and governance. It is believed to have been written in the 4th century BCE because he was the chief advisor and prime minister to Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Maurya Empire.

Main Thesis

The main argument in *The Prince* is against *Arthashastra*, which holds that rulers should not be quixotic and need at times to be amoral in the pursuit of ensuring the stability of their states and holding on to power. According to Machiavelli, being feared than loved, deceit, manipulation, flexibility to change in differing circumstances—all of these are important and necessary.

However, *Arthashastra*, as its name suggests, is a broader manual on statecraft, economics, military strategy and law. It advises the ruler to be wise and practical, to have a good understanding of the welfare of his states and its peoples. Kautilya also goes on to explain

the importance of espionage, alliances, and economic prosperity in building a powerful state.

Political Philosophy and Ethics

The Prince is popularly regarded as a manual for ruthless and cunning leadership. Machiavelli says that since the ends justify the means, rulers have no compunctions in using deceit, cruelty, and manipulation to fulfil their objectives. He separates politics from ethics and claims that moral considerations are secondary, while the pragmatic needs of the state are fundamental. His views on human nature are pessimistic; he believes that people are inherently selfish, unkind and untrustworthy, which justifies the use of control by rulers. For instance, in his book, he has cited an example of Cesare Borgia's rightful use of cruelty in establishing control over Romagna, where he ruthlessly executed disloyal leaders in order to instill fear and obedience.

In contrast to this, Kautilya's Arthashastra is a blend of ethics with political pragmatism. Although Kautilya, too, advocates using deceit and strategic manipulation in statecraft, he emphasises that the ruler must ensure the welfare and prosperity of the state and its people. To accomplish this, he advises the king to establish public infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, and markets to facilitate trade and agriculture. The treatise gives ethical guidelines for rulers, with emphasis on justice, duty, and adherence to *dharma* (moral law).

Kautilya's view of human nature is not as pessimistic, but rather balanced, and therefore he has taken into consideration the self-serving aspect and the ethical element. He suggests the kings to be self-disciplined, avoid indulgence in luxuries or pleasures and be accessible to their subjects to address their grievances.

Statecraft and Governance

Both Machiavelli and Kautilya provide detailed advice on statecraft and governance, their standpoints essentially differ in terms of scope and focus.

The Prince is more concerned with the acquisition and maintenance of political power. Machiavelli imparts knowledge on how to deal with internal and external threats, how to uphold their public image, and how to manipulate political alliances. He says there is a need for military power and that a prince should be ready to be a lion in his force, and a fox in his guile. He thereafter elucidates the argument between fortune and *virtu* by a story of

Agathocles of Syracuse, who gained power through his rigid decisions to remove competitors by calling them to a meeting and then killing them.

Kautilya's text offers a more comprehensive guide covering a plethora of administrative, legal, economic, military matters as well as foreign policies.. Kautilya provides detailed instructions on the duties and responsibilities of various officials and emphasizes the importance of a well-organised and efficient administrative system. He advises the appointment of ministers based on their merit and loyalty and recommends regular audits to prevent corruption and inefficiency as well.

He believes that taxation and trade fall under statecraft, so again the administration of resources should be strategic. But he simultaneously puts forth an idea of equitable taxation where taxes are levied in a way that does not burden the masses, suggesting a tax rate of one-sixth of the produce

The treatise deals with an elaborate system of espionage, including spies disguised as ascetics, merchants, and other people of the common citizenry, for intelligence gathering, thereby mitigating threats emanating both from within and without.

Military Strategy

Both texts strongly focus on the role and strategy of military power in the retention of power and stability.

Machiavelli, on one hand, argues that a ruler must prioritize the establishment and the maintenance of a strong military. He warned rulers against relying on mercenaries or auxiliary troops; rather, every ruler should develop a well-trained and loyal standing army. He also mentions that fortifications are vital and how force should be used carefully in quashing any dissension from within and any threats from outside. For instance, the methods the Romans deployed in maintaining control over the conquered peoples by formation of various colonies, building strong fortresses, and indigenization of local elites into the Roman administration.

Kautilya's Arthashastra, on the other hand, provides an extensive analysis of military strategy, including the organisation and training of the army, the use of various types of troops, and the strategic deployment of forces. Kautilya also emphasizes the importance of guerrilla tactics (Kutayuddha) and psychological warfare (Mantrayuddha), espionage (Upaya), and diplomacy in achieving military objectives. He proposed some strategies like

Chaturaanga-Bala or the Four-Fold Strategy, Sadgunya or the Sixfold Policy, Prayogika or the Use of Psychological Tactics, and so on.

Other than this, he suggests rulers to build forts on hills, forests, and riverbanks in order to be well-stocked with provisions at all times. He advocates that the rulers must adopt practical methods of waging war using both direct and indirect methods to win.

Economic Policies

Of the founding fathers of political realism, economic prosperity is an issue of concern to both, although the approaches differ in detail and emphasis.

While Machiavelli briefly touches on economic issues, primarily in the context of maintaining political stability and military strength, Kautilya provides a comprehensive guide to economic policies, covering topics such as agriculture, trade, and resource management in detail.

Machiavelli teaches princes how not to squeeze their subjects beyond reasonable taxes and to keep the people in a state of contentment and prosperity to avoid rebellion.

In contrast, Kautilya provides detailed regulations regarding the administration of various economic activities, including trade regulation, administration of public works, and tax collection. Kautilya suggests that rulers should introduce a method of economic incentives and penalties to make the people act in compliance with the state's policies. The policies he proposed in that age, like heavy duties on imports, minting coins of standard weight and purity, infrastructural development for generation of employment, nationalising industries like mining and salt production, categorizing labour for different wage rates, are some of the many ideals which the nations strive to implement even today.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Both recognise the importance of diplomacy and strategic alliances in maintaining state security and stability.

Being more cynical about the world, Machiavelli advises rulers to be cautious in their alliances and to prioritise their interests. One such policy was that of keeping neighbouring states weak and divided to prevent any of them from becoming a threat. He warns of flexibility and pragmatism in foreign policy while laying emphasis on strategic use of deceit

and manipulation in effective attainment of set diplomatic goals. This he exemplifies on the case of Ferdinand of Aragon, who through cunning and deceit was able to expand his power.

Similarly, Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a more systematic approach to foreign policy, outlining various strategies for dealing with different types of states and rulers. Fundamentally, he argues that for any foreign policy to yield certain results, espionage and intelligence gathering have to be employed. Mandala Theory (Circle of Kings) wherein he outlines a framework for understanding the complex relationships between different states as allies, enemies or neutrals and the Sixfold Policy (Shadgunya) of choosing a position of peace, war, neutrality, alliance, preparing for war or double policy based on the circumstances of his state, remain relevant even in the current geopolitical scenario.

Conclusion

Both Machiavelli's "The Prince" and Kautilya's "Arthashastra" are foundational texts on political theory and statecraft that provide great insights on power nature, governance, and strategy. Although they share some similarities in their pragmatic approach to politics, they differ significantly in their ethical frameworks, scope and focus.

Machiavelli has focused primarily on the attainment and maintenance of political power, firmly endorsing ruthless and immoral means. His views concerning human nature and morality reflect his overall pessimism, hence he has focused more on manipulation and control.

While Arthashastra by Kautilya provides a more comprehensive guide to governance by integrating ethical principles with pragmatic statecraft, it places equal emphasis on ideals of justice, duty, welfare of the state, and its subjects with strategic manipulation and deception.

Though separated by time and culture, these two works have much in common; they are the politically realist stances that are still pertinent today hence offering lessons to modern politicians as well as scholars.