

Redefining the Ancient Underpinnings of Modern Statecraft

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Tanya Singh
Saksham Kumar

Abstract

The classical treatise Arthashastra composed by Kautilya, talks about ‘Saptang Theory of State’, this ancient theory substantially contributes to governance, statecraft and political administration of a state. The Saptang Theory envisions the state as an organic entity composed of seven interrelated elements. The theory instead of viewing the ruler as the sole authority of the state, argues that there is a multifaceted system of governance hinged upon coordinated and effective functioning of all the elements.

The chapter tries to establish an intellectual continuity between classical and contemporary political theory and how ancient statecraft acts as a precursor to modern theories of state capacity. The chapter first discusses the Saptang Theory in its historical perspective and then interprets its seven elements in context to the modern state political authority. Although the theory contemplates monarchical and hierarchical perspective of the ancient times, but the chapter tries to scrutinise the boarder perspectives of state capacity and the state interdependence among various state institutions. Highlighting the historical underpinnings of the modern statecraft.

Keywords: *Saptang Theory, Kautilya, Contemporary World, Modern Statecraft, State Administration, Indian Knowledge System.*

Introduction

The ancient Indian knowledge system infuses ideas regarding governance, state power and political organisation in the contemporary

Tanya Singh

Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Central University of Haryana.

Saksham Kumar

Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Bareilly College, Bareilly (U.P.)

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world. One of the most significant beneficinations of ancient Indian knowledge system is ‘Saptang Theory of State’ enunciated by the classical political thinker Kautilya in his famous treatise the Arthashastra. The theory is defined as a foundational concept in the Indian Political thought presenting state as a sophisticated entity composed of seven interdependent elements. These elements collectively ensure political stability, administrative efficiency, and territorial security.

The Sanskrit term *Saptanga* translates to “seven limbs,” contemplating the resemblance between the state and the human body. That is just like the functioning of human body depends on the coordinated functioning of all organs, the state also requires balanced functioning of all its elements. As these elements are the foundational pillars of any organisation and governance. The theory presents the early systematic theorization of state structure in ancient India. Even though the theory emerged in the ancient era, its notion is still pertinent in the modern statecraft. The modern states still depend on these seven elements for their efficient functioning.

Reassessing such ancient theories besides proving the understanding of ancient political arrangements in a state, facilitates discussions and debates about the significance of ancient knowledge system in modern academic analysis.

The Saptang Framework

Kautilya’s Arthashastra, written in 300 BCE, is a remarkable manuscript of ancient India. The Arthashastra is regarded as a masterpiece of statecraft and diplomacy. In this finest piece of statecraft we find, the ‘Saptang Theory’ stating that the state is composed of seven different elements - Swami (king), Amatya (ministers), Jana pada (territory/population), Durga (fort), Kosha (treasury), Danda (army), and Mitra (allies). Demonstrating the idea that state is not an individual identity, but a combination of seven integrated elements called the “Angas” or “prakriti’s”.

Unlike the contemporary theories focusing on the structural and institutional parts of the states, the Saptang Theory highlights the interconnectedness amongst the state elements. The theory is based on the operational challenges, and the ground level concerns in the

ancient India. The theory therefore performed a dual role of providing best practises for the ruler and conceptual model for the ancient and as well as modern statecraft.

The theoretical framework of the theory presents that the state power is multidimensional and cannot be sustained by the leader alone instead administrative coordination, resource management and other factors are equally important. This outlines the perspective that the Saptang Theory although formulated in the ancient times, is still helps us in tracing down the ancient understanding of the administrative foundations of the state. This multifaceted framework of the theory optimises the modern statecraft.

The Contemporary Applicability of the Seven Elements

Swami: The leader

The very first element of the theory is the ruler (Swami). The king is depicted as the head of the state. He makes all important appointments and governs the state. Kautilya also talks about the qualities of the ruler i.e. the ruler should treat the people in his state like his own children. The welfare of the people was the sole responsibility of the ruler.

In the contemporary world, the monarchies are not as such prevalent, the states have now become democratic, but the role of the leader is still pivotal to the state. Even in the contemporary world the major decision making or the central role of administration are routed to the leadership role in the state.

However, the modern leader is not someone with the crown but the executive or the administrator of the state. The personal qualities stated by Kautilya for the leader called the “Atma-Sampad”. These qualities are what we call the emotional intelligence and the ethical leadership in the modern world. In the fast-growing world the integrity of the leader is more questioned than in the 300 B.C.

Kautilya famously wrote: *“In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness.”* Finds its relevance in the modern world as good governance or the welfare governance. The leader’s authority in today’s time is not based on the divine theory instead the performance of the leader is assessed.

The 21st century is often characterised as the age of constant crisis, but even during such crisis the ruler remains the indispensable part of the state providing stability and decisiveness to the administration.

Amatya: The Ministers

The ministers or the administrators (Amatya) forms the second element of the theory. Kautilya asserted that “governance is possible only with assistance - a single wheel cannot move a carriage.” These Amatyas have translated into the modern world bureaucrats. Kautilya was an early proponent of meritocracy, he wanted that the Amatyas should be selected based on their integrity and capabilities. This selection procedure of Kautilya in ancient times laid the foundation stone of Civil Service Examination in the modern world.

The Amatyas were also provided with the duty to act as the advisor to the king regarding the day-to-day administration of the state. This task of the Amatyas is what we see in the modern world as of the economic, political and security advisors to the Prime Minister. As it is believed since the ancient times that the king or the leader alone cannot be an expert in every field. This makes the role of Amatyas or the bureaucrats crucial in the state administration.

Another responsibility given to the Amatyas was to gather information and keep a check on the working of the administration as Kautilya was always suspicious of corruption in the state. He stated that “it is as difficult to tell if an official is drinking state wealth as it is to tell if a fish is drinking water.” This part of Kautilya’s guidance led to the formation of Ombudsman (Lokpal), Auditors (CAG), and Anti-corruption Bureaus in the modern state.

Lastly, Kautilya talked about the Karmasiddhi, i.e. the successful completion of the work. We often see that there is a gap between policy making and policy implementation, this gap in the administrative machinery if fulfilled by the Amatays or the modern-day bureaucrats.

With this we can conclude that the role of Amatyas is even more pertinent in the modern world. The leader and its state would come to cropper without an efficient bureaucrat(Amatya).

Janpada: The Territory

The third element refers to the territory and the people of the state. Kautilya talks about a prosperous and stable territory with people being loyal to their ruler. These characteristics of territory and people forms a stronger base for political efficiency in the state. Kautilya mentions that the states should have clear cut demarcation of borders with abundance of natural resources. This rendered into national security and geopolitics of the contemporary states. As above mentioned, the 21st century is the characterised as the age of crisis, the territorial integrity of the state acts as a source of national identity in such crisis.

A resilient Janpada according to Kautilya was one being productive enough to support the army and the administration of the state. This argument of Kautilya develops into the concept of economic sovereignty. The modern states endeavour their goal of self-sufficiency as in the contemporary world the state without adequate resources is rendered as weak.

The specifications provided by Kautilya about creating settlements like the distance between the villages or the layouts of the towns acted as a foundation of urban planning and development. The best example of this can be the 'Special Economic Zones' being created by the government. These zones are the architectural plans of Kautilya's self-sufficient Janpadas.

The territory of the state not only qualifies as an essential element, instead it also signifies the maintenance of political legitimacy in the state. Thus, the Janpada mentioned in the Arthashastra still persists as an essential element in the modern states.

Durga: The Fortified Capital or The Infrastructure

The Durga alludes to the fort or the infrastructure of the state forming the fourth element of the theory. Kautilya signifies forts as an essential element for state security. He described four types of forts - hill forts, water forts, desert forts and forest forts. These forts acted as a hideout for people and the ruler at the time of war. The forts were also considered important for administrative efficiency.

Kautilya divided the forts into three administrative blocks namely Sthaniya, Dronamukha, Karvatika, these administrative zones

became the forerunner of decentralised governance in the contemporary world. As it is said governance is only effective when the infrastructure carrying it is effective. In modern world the panchayat, district, state and central government are the new administrative zones getting its inspiration form the Durga element of the Saptang theory.

Strict laws in context to infrastructure development were also presented in the theory such as garbage disposal, house building regulations, sanitisation. This development rules stated in the ancient times have taken over as the civic infrastructure in the modern days also referring to the concept of urban governance and public health. Consequently, we can say that the importance of critical national infrastructure has become even more crucial in the daily changing dynamics of the contemporary world.

Kosha: The Treasury

Kosha refers to the treasury of the state and is the fifth element of the theory. Kautilya famously stated, “*All undertakings depend on Kosha*”. Therefore, it should always be full of money and other ornaments. As it is next to impossible to run a state without proper funds.

To maintain this treasury Kautilya gave the philosophy of taxation, the state should collect taxes like a honeybee sucks nectar from a flower—taking enough to sustain the hive without harming the flower. This concept is what we know as the optimal taxation theory of the modern world. The government collects taxes from the people, and this taxpayer money acts as the Kosha for the modern government.

This Kosha collected by the Ruler or the government in modern era is not for the luxury as mentioned by Kautilya, this Kosha is the trust of public welfare (*Yogakshema*). Kautilya stated that it was impossible for the Amatyas to not eat a bit of king’s revenue as it is impossible for a person with honey on their tongue to taste it. This led to Kautilya forming “Forty Ways of Embezzlement”. These 40 ways through which the officials embezzled the funds acted as the modern foundational stone for Public Financial Management (PFM) and Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG).

The 21st century has seen many debt crisis, which makes the filled treasury (Kosha) as an important determinant of a strong or weak state in the modern world.

Danda: The Army

The sixth element of the theory is the Danda; it talks about the state army and punishment. It is the most vital organ for the state security, it is responsible for enforcing laws, punishing the criminals and ensuring the safety of the state. Kautilya stated that without Danda in the state, the state would fall into the trap of *Matsya-nyaya* (the Law of the Fish, where the big fish eat the small). This evolved as the concept of National defence and international deterrence in the modern world.

Kautilya believed that the Danda must not be applied too harshly or too mildly, because if it is too harsh the people will revolt and if it is too mild the state becomes disorganised. This is the gist of the modern-day criminal system which always acts in equivalence i.e. punishing the criminals and protecting the law-abiding citizens. Strong army was another important component of the Danda. Kautilya asserted that the Janpada could only survive when the state maintained a strong army. Danda does not mean using force, but the army prevents the adversaries from the attacker side. This component emerged as the notion of hard power.

Even though Kautilya talked about the strong army but, he warned about the undisciplined army could act as threat to the king. Therefore, he talked about accountability of the army. This accountability translated into civilian control of the military i.e. in the modern states the army is always subsidiary to the leader. Preventing military coups and chaos in the state, contributing to state survival.

Mitra: The Allies

The last and the final element of the theory is the Mitra, it signifies friend. Kautilya believed that the state will be at susceptibility without allies, because allies add to the power of state and are also important for international trades. The allies were divided into three - Sahaja-mitra (allies through close relatives), Krtrima (allies through reciprocal favours with other kings), and Prakrta (allies living near neighbouring kingdoms).

During ancient times the allies provided grains, ornaments and animals for state welfare, this exchange of goods and services is what we know as the trade in the modern world, the allies (friendly Nations) provide free market access and various technology and services transfers to each other.

Kautilya cautioned the king regarding Chala-Mitra (The Fickle Friend) and suggested to be watchful even towards the allies. The watchfulness suggested by Kautilya forms the strategic autonomy of today's world i.e. even the close allies have conflicts. So, Kautilya suggested to have close allies but at the same time build your own Danda and Kosha for as a precaution.

The concept of soft and hard power was also pioneered by Kautilya, he suggested the ruler to use "Sahaja" (The Natural Way), where the allies are formed based on shared history, heredity and alliances through marriage. The second suggested was "Kritima" (The Acquired Way), where the ruler makes specific efforts to win over the ally i.e. Sama (persuasion), Dana (gifts), Bheda (dissension), Danda (force).

Mitra (Allies) helps the state to voice its narrative to the world, and making its presence felt in the global order. Serving as a key element of modern statecraft.

Conclusion

The Saptang Theory, presents crucial perspectives of state administration. The theory was designed for the ancient monarchical system of governance where the actual power belonged to the king whereas the modern states work on the principle of popular sovereignty and rule of law. Regardless of this difference, the fundamental principles of state capacity mentioned in the theory remains unaffected. As the core principle of the theory talks about balanced governance i.e. if any of the seven element is untended by the state, the whole institutional structure is jeopardised.

Substantially, the theory contributes to the integrated perspective of governance. Instead of talking Soley about political authority, the theory tries to cover international relations, territorial stability, geopolitics, economic resources and military strength. Facilitating a pragmatic understanding of the statecraft. The evaluation

of theory elucidates the debates of ancient underpinning of the modern statecraft. Although the theory presents conceptual insights for modern statecraft, but the interpretation and adaption of these insights is act as practical challenge for the modern states.

To sum-up, the Saptang Theory is the cornerstone of ancient political thought. Its interconnected element of the state provides a comprehensive framework for the modern state to function. Deeply embedded in the ancient Indian history, the theory continues deliver a modern outlook on governace, state capacity and political organisation.

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