



Indian Strategic Thought: From Kautilya to Modi

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My topic is India's strategic thought from Kautilya to Modi. One very important question that at the very outset I want to raise is as to whether India has had a strategic thought, ever. Scholars have opined differently. Some thought that India doesn't have any strategic thought. Scholars like Mohan Malik have even said that India doesn't have a strategic culture itself.

On a lighter note, somebody said that not having any strategic doctrine is the strategy of India. Some scholars opined that India had some strategic thinking, they think back to the



But I would like to take the antiquities of India's strategic thought back to the Mahabharata era in Indian history which is about five millennia old. In the treatise of Mahabharata the 12th chapter is called the Shanti Parva. The Shanti Parva is one important chapter that deals with strategic issues and strategic thought. When it talks about strategic thought it doesn't limit itself to wars and military or something to do only with these abstracts. But it talks about the entire statecraft. How a king should secure and bring prosperity to his state and the people, is what was discussed in Shanti Parva in a very elaborate manner.

Shanti Parva the 12th chapter of the Mahabharata essentially contains a conversation between Bhishma a renowned elder of the Mahabharata clan, both the Pandavas and the Kauravas are two sets of cousins. Bhishma Pitamah is described as "Pitamah" the grand old man. Between him and the newly enthroned king Yuddhishtira who is also called as the Dharmaraj. Yuddhishtira becomes the king after the Mahabharata war. And he goes to the deathbed of the nearly dying Bhishma seeking his wisdom on governance. That is what the Shanti Parva contains. And very interestingly major portions of Kautilyan thought which is contained in the Arthashastra treatise are actually drawn from Shanti Parva.

So I think that India's ancient strategic thought can be traced not just to Kautilya about two millennia back but to Sage Bhisma or the author of the Mahabharata treatise Sage Ved Vyasa. So this Shanti Parva is an important contribution to India's strategic thinking. In the Shanti Parva, the ultimate objective of the King has been described as restoration and protection of Dharma. Very interestingly in that book Bishma tells Yuddhishtira that the king should not have any ideology.

That's a very important primary lesson that he gives to Yuddhishtira. In fact he goes on to say that 'you see when you become the king you will be facing the advice of many saffron robed people, in other word Sanyasis, sages. They come and tell you many theories. But statecraft should not be driven by any ideology.' He says the paramount thing for any King should be



be wise. You may recall in the later period the Greek philosophers like Plato have talked about philosopher kings. But that was much later. It was in Mahabharata that Bhishma insists that king should not be obedient, should not be a fool. He should be wise. So, a wise but a simple person, is how the qualities of a King have been mandated by Bhishma Pitamah in that.

Shanti Parva says that king's duty is to protect and promote the Dharma, Dharma is righteousness and truth. Essentially for a king it prescribes three different types of Dharma. It's a very interesting description. First it says Rajdharm, that is mandated by the rules, by the constitution, by the rule of law. Every country has its own constitution. King/Ruler is mandated to implement and follow the constitution judiciously. That is what Rajdharm is.

But he says there is something called Apaddharma that allows the king, in order to secure his kingdom, to follow what Bhishma calls *the other means*. A King as part of this Apaddharma can go beyond the set norms and rules. But remember only the king can do that. Even this has a logic. Bhishma says that a King cannot go successfully in this world with one sided morality. The logic or rationale for applying Apaddharma is that one sided morality would not work. So the King has the option of Apaddharma.

He also goes on to say that the world has a component of violence in it. In fact he says no one in this world lives without the use of violence. The stronger ones live on the weaker ones. In the Arthashastra in the later years Chanakya/Kautilya talks about Matsyan Nyaya, Matsya means fish, Nyaya means the order. The order of how fish live in the pond. He also describes the same thing that violence is inbuilt in this creation, the bigger fish eats up the smaller fish in the pond. That is the reason why in Shanti Parva it is stated that the king can have what he described as Apaddharma. Now since the major mission or objective of the king is to secure his kingdom, secure his people, the Shanti Parva talks about 7 rings or 7 aspects or 7 elements of statecraft.



Danda, an institution to punish the guilty. You can call it army, the military, the criminal law, the criminal procedure code. That is Danda neeti. Number 4 is Kosha, the Treasury. He should have enough resources in order for him to deliver. Number 5 he says is Mitra, he should have alliances, and he should have friends outside. Number 6 is Janapada. He's a king but no territory. He's a king but no people to rule over. So a king as an important component of the statecraft should have some people over which he would govern, a territory and people. And the 7 is Durg or Pura. A secured city area or a fortress within which the king lives and his subjects live, a security fortress. So for a kingdom to really be secure and prosperous he says all 7 elements are required.

Now since this capsule is about foreign policy, I will only derive certain foreign policy principles of this ancient Indian strategic treatise, both from the Shanti Parva and the Arthashastra. Rest all we will leave. How wise should be a minister? How much money should be there in the Kosha? I will leave them aside for subsequent discussions. But let me focus on things like alliances. Now Shanti Parva describes four types of alliance.

Type 1- The alliance that is established by winning over through gifts and your kindness. When I say this you can imagine all these things happen in the world even today.

Type 2- An alliance based on loyalty and dedication. Some people are very loyal to some country.

Type 3- Same objective. If you have similar objectives, that can be a reason for alliance. For example, a democracy and another democracy can form an alliance.

Type 4- You have relationships with people who are governing in other states. Then you can establish contacts. These relations can be direct relations, relations based on cultural aspects, historical aspects, relationships also can become a basis for alliances. For example in the world outside there are at least six countries which have people of Indian origin as Prime



distinction when it comes to alliances which is the first lesson taught to students of international relations today in all the universities. It was said in Shanti Parva that friendship and enmity are not permanent affairs. In international relations while I'm saying you have alliances, no friendship and no enmity is going to be permanent. Both will be based on self motives. And Kautilya in Arthashastra says it is based on self-interest.

Self-interest doesn't mean interest of the king, Interest of the kingdom. So for friendship and enmity, the basis is nothing else but your country's interests. Your nation's interest. In that Bhishma makes a very subtle warning saying, 'the king should be cautious even with his friends.' You can't simply say he is my friend and I trust him fully. And Shanti Parva says that while looking for alliances, forming alliances you should look for good hearted noble intentioned rulers for alliances.

He advises kings to look for good people outside in other kingdoms and have alliances with those good kings. But he also said as a rider that alliance with the wicked is also permitted if situation demands. That's why he says you cannot have any ideology guiding you. 'I don't talk to somebody who is a communist' you can't say. Or have this romantic idea that if you are not a Democrat you cannot be my friend. You cannot say that you will befriend only a Democrat. You will also befriend a starred General ruling over your neighbor if required. He says the guiding principle for you is your national interest. Today in foreign policy dictum it is popularly said that there are no permanent friends or permanent foes. It is only permanent interest that guides one country's relations with the other.

Then there is a question on wars. The Shanti Parva describes four types of wars which a country has to endure, which a country has to be prepared for:

Number one is Dharmayuddha. A war fought on the prescribed rules. There are certain rules for waging such a war. So that is Dharmayuddha. This whole Mahabharata war which was waged some 5 millennia back in this country was a war that went on for 18 days. There were



damage to civilians no damage to Pura or the city.

But, he says there is something called Aprasisthayuddha which is a war that is never declared. We in our present day terminology call it as proxy wars. Largely those countries which promote terrorism in the world resort to this Aprasisthayuddha war i.e. an undeclared war. So take it that terrorism is not just cross-border or in-country, cross-border war will be by other means. It's a proxy war. This is what Shanti Parva says.

Even in India, many times you come across this phrase cross-border terrorism. There is no such thing. It's actually a war by proxy, Aprasistha war. Then of course he goes on to describe two other forms of war which were contemporary to that period. He says of Maya-yuddha something equivalent in the present era to using missiles, when the enemy is not visible. Only his missile is visible. That also when it comes very near to hit you. If you are from Israel you have the dome but elsewhere we don't have those domes also.

The fourth is what he calls as the Mantra-yuddha. The nearest equivalent of that today is the cyber war. You are not even using any weapon, only your computer is the weapon. So these four types of wars he describes. But a war whichever way you wage it whether it is a dharmayuddha or the proxy war, there are four ways of going for it.

Then the question is how do we know our adversary? Shanti Parva as well as Kautilya's Arthashastra say that there are four ways. One is Sama. Sama is peaceful agreement between the two sides. You both agree that there should be no war. So peaceful reconciliation that is Sama. The second is Dana, i.e. some kind of a bribery. You will bribe him and tell him to please stop the war and in return you will give him something, be it territory or money. It can be anything but a bribery through which you can avoid war. Number three he says Bheda. Bheda is through subversion. You actually create subversion and intrigue in the camp of your adversary/enemy. Divide him. That is number three and number four he says use of force which is Danda.



go for the use of force that is Danda.

These principles are also enshrined in Kautilya's treatise of Arthashastra. The greatness of Arthashastra is it goes a little farther. It goes beyond these things and gives them a formal structure.

How do you as a King use them? How do you deploy these thoughts into actual practice? That organization of these ideas is what you find in the Arthashastra.

In Arthashastra, Kautilya talks about 6 different strategies in dealing with the adversary. Number 1 he calls it Samadhi. Just have peace. Number 2 is war, fight with him. Number 3 is some type of neutrality, you are neither here nor there.

You heard about non-alignment. What does non-alignment mean? There was a time when the world was divided into two camps, one camp was the camp led by the United States of America, the so-called capitalist camp. The other camp was led by USSR, the so-called Socialist camp. So there were a number of countries which thought that they should belong to neither. Neither with capitalists nor with communists. So what is your identity I am a Democrat. That's not my identity. I am not USA or USSR. So I am what I am. That's called neutrality.

The 4th is coercive diplomacy or coercion. We have friends from Iran and they know what coercion is. Coercive diplomacy is fourth strategy. 5th of course is alliance building. You build your alliances to tackle your adversary. And 6th he says you also play a diplomatic double game. These are six strategies that countries deploy and when I narrate these six immediately I know for each one of them you suddenly recollect one country. When I say diplomatic double standards, we Indians know who those people who practice that are.

Each other country would be having their own experiences. But again like Shanti Parva in Arthashastra, Kautilya insists that war should be the last resort. Although it is the listed as the



Kautilya was a very pragmatic teacher and that's why he repeated the statement of Shanti Parva that the King should not have any ideology. King should only have truth and righteousness as his guiding principle and ideology. Some of the important practical directives that Kautilya gives to Chandra Gupta Maurya are as follows:

He says a kingdom is as secure as its border lands are. The security of the kingdom does not lie in the capital. It lies in the periphery. So he insists that you have to ensure that your periphery is secure. So that's why Kautilya forces Chandragupta Maurya, his king who was ruling over Pataliputra, in central India, today's Patna to Afghanistan. He said you should secure Afghanistan, You have to secure those borders in order for your Patna to be secure.

Chandragupta Maurya was a married man. He had a war with Seleucus Nicator from Greek in which history says Maurya wins. But after the victory Kautilya insists that Chandragupta should marry the daughter of Seleucus by name Helena. Chandragupta says I'm a married man. Kautilya says King has no choice of his own. He says for building lasting alliances you have to do it. Then Helena becomes Helena Maurya, the second wife of a Chandragupta Maurya. This whole thinking of securing your Borderlands, making people patriotic about your country, not just the people around you in your capital city is the real security for the Kingdom. These principles belong to third century B.C. when Chandragupta Maurya was ruling.

Subsequently in India Buddhism became the predominant religion and flourished in this country, but the Buddhist masters have realized the importance of this doctrine and they tried to take the Buddhist religion to the neighbourhood of India. Very prominent kings like Ashoka decided to send these missionaries of peace, Buddhism is a religion of peace, to the neighbouring kingdoms around India so that you have peace as a doctrine around you. The result was India had an outer ring of Buddhist countries which had secured India from external aggressions because they were the peace loving cushion around India. But subsequently, when for them peace became an ideology it started complications for the



any relevance for India today. Unfortunately in the initial years of independence the leadership of India was more romantic in its foreign policy approach than Kautilya's pragmatism. It was romanticism, it was ideologies that used to drive the policies. We had these principles called Panchashila, these five principles of peaceful neighbourhood relations. This could be a tactic like Buddhism, but it became a kind of an obsession, a romanticism.

We paid some price for converting certain ideas into a sort of religion, forgetting that the entire Indian strategic thought has always talked about pragmatic approach not idealism driven approach. It took some time for India to realize that its foreign policy needs to be based on its ancient strategic thought and wisdom. Let me take you to the present government's foreign policy thinking how it draws certain inspiration from some of these ancient Indian strategic thoughts and wisdom.

One of the doctrines of present day India's foreign policy is the policy of a neighbourhood first. We have certain neighbours around us, when we were romantic in our approach, when we used to think that only democracies are the forms of government that deserve respect all other forms are to be condemned, we used to have very rough relations with countries like Nepal in our immediate neighbourhood. The reason was that Nepal wasn't a democracy, it was a kingdom, a monarchy. But how can we respect a monarchy? So we used to have rough relations with them.

But, then we realized we found a leader in uniform a starred general as the president of our neighbour. We were forced to deal with him, then we realized you cannot decide about the form of government of your neighbour. We dealt with General Musharraf, a uniformed general leading Pakistan because you can't be guided just by ideology. Our government in the last few years decided that policy should be neighbourhood first. And we believe in the doctrine of *Together we grow*. Just as Kautilya suggested that your security lies in the security and prosperity of your neighbours, your borders. So our doctrine today is *together we grow*.



Pacific region, ASEAN group of countries and a few other countries which are not necessarily a part of the ASEAN region but have historical linkages especially in the East African continent. Even countries in the Middle East that have had a historical cultural religious civilizational linkage, religion, culture has become an important part of our diplomacy today. That's what Chanakya meant when he said relationships also can become a basis for your alliance building.

Today we build strong alliances based on that. And that whole concept that you cannot be guided in your foreign policy by any ideology. You have to be pragmatic and that has led us to articulate a new concept called de-hyphenation today. De-hyphenation means India will have relations, alliances with countries in the world on a standalone basis. For example we have good, strong defense ties with America today. But we also have strong, defense ties with Russia. We have strong diplomatic political trade relations with Saudi Arabia, but we also have strong diplomatic trade relations with Iran. We have best of the relations in last five decades with Israel. But we also have traditional relations with Palestine. We stopped hyphenating them. We had to be a little courageous because in this world there will be leaders who will say either you are with me or you are against me. There is no space left to be otherwise, to be friends with both. But we said no, de-hyphenation should guide India's foreign policy. This is based on the dictum that you see in alliance building, you have to be wary of your own friends. But you can build alliances with the most wicked also. Your interests should guide you.

Then we follow the concept of wider engagement. Based on three or four different doctrines. Engage in a very wide spectrum, engage with people, not just with kings, not just with rulers but with people. And if you check in your own country, in many countries the experience is the taxi driver when somebody mentions about India he will say 'India Yes, Modi. I love him.' He has nothing to do with his own government much less with our government. But he knows. This is building bridges with the larger societies engaging with communities engaging with the diaspora.



We do not believe in wars. We are not war mongers. But then as I said war is not something that you unilaterally decide whether to wage or not. You will be forced into war especially if you have the kind of neighbours that we have in India. 'You cannot choose your parents' the adage goes. You cannot choose your neighbours either. Even as an individual you have a house you don't know who will be your neighbour. You will only have to learn to live with him. For us war is the last option but we do not mind using all the other three Sama, Dana, and Bheda. We practice coercive diplomacy. When somebody is using terrorism against us we use coercion as the means, may not be war to teach him a lesson.

We draw in our foreign policy doctrine, a lot of such lessons from the wisdom of ancient Indian Kings, ancient Indian sages and Indian seers right from Shanti Parva, to Kautilya's Arthashastra to Buddhism to contemporaneous Indian scholarship. We draw these lessons and we developed a new strategic path in our country. Friends, the last point that I submit here is for all this to happen Both Shanti Parva and Kautilya's Arthashastra, both insist that the king should be absolutely clean. You need the King to be above board. Then only he can deploy, he can win over the confidence of all others. You may have strength, you may have money which we have today. Have all other things but if the king is not clean, if King is not good then the country is doomed to fail.

That's what Plato said when he said philosopher kings, a king with no self-interest. A king whose only interest is the welfare and well-being of his subjects, his people. You know Chandragupta Maurya towards the end of his life becomes a Jain. Jain is a religion in India. Jains are absolute peace loving people. Chandragupta Maurya decides to become a Jain only because of the kind of guidelines that Chanakya was imposing on him. He said as a king you have to lead the life of the last man in your kingdom not the richest man in your kingdom.

Chanakya used to live like that and slept on the floor. He came back home in the evening and would turn off the lantern which the government provided and he would turn on the lanterns



I can say fortunately that we have in this country, rulers who do not have any self-interest because they are guided by what our ancient strategic wisdom teaches us. Right from Shanti Parva in Mahabharata to Kautilya's Arthashastra to present day.

This is in a nutshell India's strategic thought, its antiquity and how it has translated into certain actionable items in present day India's foreign policy.



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