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Human development part 2: Ancient kingship, modern politicians and the problem of corruption in India

Abstract

Extract:

Turning to the modern relevance of the essence of the prescriptions in the two ancient texts for making a competent and honest king, it may be observed that corruption and dishonesty of politicians have become important issues in recent years.

Keywords

United Nations Development Program, India, king, Manusmriti, Artha??stra

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VIEWPOINT:

**Human Development Part 2:
Ancient Kingship, Modern Politicians
and the Problem of Corruption in India**

by Ratan Lal Basu(1)

The term Human Development (HD), in essence, should be related to development of humanitarian qualities for an individual or for the society as whole. The question arises how this definition of HD is related to the conventional definition popularized in recent years by Amartya Sen, Mahbub Ul Haq and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). They have also attempted to quantify HD in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI) which takes into account amenities and entitlements necessary for development of human capabilities (physical as well as intellectual). There is no denying that enhancement of the HDI (by enlarging and widening the scope for basic amenities and entitlements for the majority) are essential for development of humanitarian qualities. But this on its own does not ensure HD in the true sense, as achievements in terms of physical and intellectual capabilities do not automatically lead to development of humanitarian qualities.(2)

Since ancient times, religious texts have enunciated ethical codes (for example, the Ten Commandments of Moses as elaborated in the Bible, the Talmud and the Quran; Buddhist and Jainist principles, rituals in ancient Hindu *Śāstras*). They undeniably aimed at HD in the true sense of the term. But religious sanctions have their own limitations as they depend mostly on the unquestioning faith of people (based, for example, on fear of God or punishment after death) and are inalienably mixed with rituals, which are not connected to ethics.

Simple moral suasion, whether religious or secular, is not likely to have any sustainable impact on the moral, ethical and other humanitarian values of the society as a whole. So legal sanctions combined with moral and ethical education in a democratic polity is likely to be the best method for ensuring progress towards higher humanitarian values for the society as a whole. But this is problematic in that there is no guarantee that politicians and political parties will possess high humanitarian values. They may be elected with other considerations predominating, such as economic management, security issues, or even a charismatic media presence. Ensuring humanitarian achievements for their society need not be - and often is not - paramount. So one important precondition for enabling the process of human development should be finding the political will to do so.

In this regard, the ancient Indian texts *Manusmriti* and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya are may prove to be a surprising source of help. The prescriptions in these texts for making an ethical and competent king may be suitably modified to the present political world. Below I discuss the prescriptions in these texts and then consider their relevance (after suitable modification) for a modern democratic country like India. The findings of this study are that the political will for humanitarian development requires a corruption-free regime. In other words, the ethical quality of government itself matters in promoting an ethically-based society. This may sound like a 'top-down' prescription and hence unfashionable in the current climate of celebrating 'bottom-up' activism. However, both are needed and too often, focus on one tends to displace the other. Here, India's historical voice of cautions calls on a return to good governance as exemplified by the ideal king. While what follows may appear

quaint and distant, it does lend itself to contemporary language and concepts (as will be show below).

MANUSMIRTI

According to *Manusmriti* to be a good ruler, the king should regulate his lifestyle in a proper way. Then only he would have the right and power to rule the country and apply the *danda* (the rod of punishment) to the miscreants. He should be intelligent, free from vices, cultured, upright, should have self-control, should respect the elders and the Brahmins, should have proper education (of the Vedas, politics, history, agriculture, and spiritual science) and he should protect his subjects with zeal. The king should be intelligent, free from addiction to sensuous objects, cultured, true to his promise, backed by friends and should adhere to the sacred texts. Below are some representative quotations from this text:

7/30: "It [the rod] cannot be rightly employed by a king who is without friends, foolish, avaricious, uncultured and addicted to sensuous objects."

7/31: "It can be employed by a king who is pure [in monetary matters], true to his promise, intelligent, backed by friends and a follower of the *śāstrīya* path."

7/32: "In his own kingdom he should be of upright conduct, to his enemies he should be of rigorous punishment, to his natural friends he should be sincere, and towards the Brahmins, he should be forgiving."

7/33: "Of a king of such a conduct, the fame spreads in the world, like a drop of oil on water."

7/40: "A good many kings, though provided with resources, have perished through want of self-control and a good many of them, though doomed to forest life [i.e., though without resources], have gained kingdoms through self-control."

7/41: "Vena, Nahusha, Sudāh, son of Pijavana, Sumukha and Nimi - these kings perished through want of self-control."

7/42: "On the other hand, Prithu got the kingdom through self-control, so also Manu. And [through self-control] did Kubera attain mastery over wealth, and Gādhi's son [Viśwamitra] the state of a Brahmin."

7/43: "He should practice the three Vedas from those versed in the same and should learn the eternal politics as well as logic, spiritual science and agriculture . . . from men versed in those subjects."

7/144: "The highest duty of a *Kshatriya* is to protect his subjects."

ARTHAŚĀSTRA

According to Kautilya, to be competent enough to rule the country, the king should go through adequate education and training. After tonsure at an early age the incumbent prince is to learn the alphabets and arithmetic. Thereafter he should learn the three Vedas, philosophy, economics and politics. He is to observe celibacy till the age of sixteen and thereafter marry. Continuous study is essential as it enhances intelligence and efficiency of the king making him capable of performing his duties in a better manner.

Kautilya, however, is of the opinion that general education and training are not enough to make a perfect king. Moral and ethical teachings are also necessary. He explains the importance and

methods of moral training of a king with examples of the downfall of many past kings, who used to violate one or more of the essential ethical norms for an ideal king. To start with, Kautilya reiterates the importance of having control over the senses.

I/6/1: "Control over the senses, which is motivated by training in the sciences, should be secured by giving up lust, anger, greed, pride, arrogance and fool-hardiness."

A contrary behaviour would bring about the ruin of a king, whatever his apparent power. In this regard Kautilya mentions how various past kings (historical and mythical) perished for lack of control over senses. So the king should have control over senses by conquering the six basic vices (lust, anger, greed, pride, arrogance and foolhardiness), and acquire wisdom from the elders to be fit for ruling the country.

I/7/1: "Therefore, by casting out the group of six enemies he should acquire control over the senses, cultivate his intellect by association with the elders, keep a watchful eye by means of spies, bring about security and well-being by (energetic) activity, maintain the observance of their special duties (by the subjects) by carrying out (his own) duties, acquire discipline by (receiving) instruction in the sciences, attain popularity by association with what is of material advantage and maintain (proper) behaviour by (doing) what is beneficial."

While the ideal king should have perfect control over the senses, this does not imply that the king should not indulge in material pleasures. In fact, Kautilya subscribes to the traditional Indian view that there should be a perfect balance of the *trivarga* - i.e., *dharma* (ethics), *artha* (material resources) and *kāma* (fulfillment of sexual and other desires) - in the life of the king, as is evident from the following *ślokas*:

I/7/3: "He should enjoy sensual pleasures without contravening his spiritual good and material well-being; he should not deprive himself of pleasures."

I/7/4: "Or, [he should devote himself] equally to the three goals of life which are bound up with one another."

I/7/5: "For, any one of [the *trivarga* of] spiritual good, material well-being and sensual pleasures, [if] excessively indulged in, does harm to itself as well as to the other two."

Now, the question arises who is to guide the king and keep him on the path of virtue, and to rectify him whenever he deviates from the path of virtue because of either his wrong judgment or temporary upsurge of evil intentions (Kautilya was wise enough to realize that even the most virtuous persons may at times be overpowered by the *ripus*, i.e., basic vices hidden in the subconscious mind) or bad company. Kautilya prescribes for competent and honest ministers, along with the Brahmin chaplain, as safeguards to keep the king on the path of virtue and propriety as in:

I/7/8: "He should set the preceptors or ministers as the bounds of proper conduct (for himself), who should restrain him from occasions of harm, or, when he is erring in private, should prick him with the goad in the form of (the indication of time for the performance of his regular duties by means of) the shadow (of gnomon) or the *nālikā* (water-clock)."

Kautilya concerned himself with the ideal of a good king. He visualized a king (the *Vijīgishu*) who would bring about territorial unification of India and make it a strong and prosperous country. There were a number of exceptional kings, most notably Chandragupta Maurya, Vindusāra and Aśoka. Lack of ideal kings, however, was one of the basic causes of downfall of the Mauryan Empire. In the Gupta era and later Indian history until British rule, the success or otherwise of dynasties was mainly related to the presence or absence of ideal kings. In modern democratic India after Independence, the sub-optimal state of affairs is due mainly to the absence of honest and competent politicians, as will

be discussed below.

As regards the controlling power of the Vedic Brahmin (chaplain) over the king there is some difference between *Manusmriti* and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya. The latter assigned more power to the king than prescribed in the earlier texts. This might have become necessary to unify India under a strong king. Whatever the reason it appears from the prescriptions of the power of the king in the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya that the Vedic Brahmin appointed by the king himself was not likely to have the same controlling power over the king as his counterpart in *Manusmriti*. This may be apprehended from the power Kautilya bestows on the king as he holds the royal edict above existing laws, custom and prescriptions of the *śāstras*. So far, the king was theoretically only the guardian of law and guidelines prescribed in the *śāstras*. Now he becomes a maker of law through royal edicts. Under these circumstances, it is quite unlikely that the Brahmin would have sufficient power to prevent the king from indulging in undesirable activities if the king is adamant to do so. But did the Vedic Brahmin even in *Manusmriti* possess sufficient real power to control an adamant king? Notwithstanding the power endowed theoretically to the Vedic Brahmin in the *Manusmriti*, it is questionable how far the Brahmin could control an unethical king. In ancient texts, the king is considered as the wielder of *danda* (rod of punishment). While *danda* is not directly relevant to the present discussion, knowledge of this concept is likely to provide a deeper insight into the concept of kingship and the qualities of a perfect king as defined in the ancient Indian texts.

Relevance of the Ancient Texts to Modern India

Turning to the modern relevance of the essence of the prescriptions in the two ancient texts for making a competent and honest king, it may be observed that corruption and dishonesty of politicians have become important issues in recent years. The mass media are replete with news about charges as well as court cases against 'big' politicians. Surprisingly, these corrupt politicians can easily manage to get re-elected and go on pursuing their mischievous activities. Many even manage to mobilize overwhelming mass support in spite of their questionable reputation. India has been endangered because of the nefarious activities of these corrupt politicians.

How does one create an honest politician? Is such a thing possible? Guidelines in *Manusmriti* and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya may be of considerable help in this regard. It is, however, argued by many that these texts devised guidelines for an all-powerful monarchy. Therefore, they have no relevance for democratic modern countries like India. However, on the basis of the guidelines delineated in these texts for the king, we may also devise similar guidelines for the politicians and political parties in a democratic system. The tentative guidelines for India politicians may be as follows:

- There should be strict educational norms for persons contesting public posts.
- Records pertaining to financial matters of all persons, holding or contesting any public position, must be clean.
- No person with a criminal record should be permitted to contest any election for a public post.
- The Election Commission and the Judicial System are to play the role of guardians and regulators of the public representatives at all levels.
- If any criminal charge against a public representative is proved, he/she should be immediately removed from office and permanently debarred from contesting any election for public office.
- There should be proper measures for providing technical and ethical teachings to persons already holding public offices or opting for contesting election for public offices.

- The Judiciary and the Election-Mechanism should be autonomous and independent of the Legislature and Administration.
- There should be measures for ensuring honesty, integrity and competence of the Judges and the Election-Personnel at all levels.

The most pertinent question in this regard is how far it would be possible for the Judicial System and the Election Commission to have controlling power over the politicians. In fact, the political party in power appoints the judges and members of the Election Commission. So, it is quite unlikely that the latter would have sufficient courage to do anything to prevent the politicians in power from indulging in activities harmful to the nation and the majority of the population. In case they undertake such intrepid steps they would be dismissed by the ruling party as soon as possible. *Ślokas 7/58 and 7/59* of *Manusmṛiti* entrust the duty of controlling the king to the chaplain, a Vedic Brahmin. But the Vedic Brahmin was to be appointed by the king and therefore his powers were limited in the same way as the Judiciary and Election Commission in modern democratic countries. Is the goal of controlling politicians and forcing them on to the ethical path merely a utopian dream? This is a serious question the answer to which will never be easy. I strongly emphasize here that perfect control of politicians according to the norms laid down in ancient texts may not be possible, but in a democratic arrangement, if the masses are made aware of these norms and create pressure with the assistance of the free mass media for implementation of these norms through the Election Commission and Supreme Court, we are likely to converge more and more towards an ideal state and our democracy may become more significant. This is where the 'bottom-up' approach matters in good governance. This is also where the modern relevance of the king-making norms of ancient Indian texts may be actualized. In other words, the ideals exist in our political philosophy, but their realization will depend on popular uprising (a 'bottom-up' demand for clean government).

How does this tie in with Human Development, my overarching theme? With the emergence of an ideal democratic state (converging towards a cherished corruption-free situation), the process of HD in the true sense of the term may begin. This process, its monitoring and quantification problems and other relevant matters will be taken up in my next article.

Endnotes:

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2. See my 'Viewpoint' article in the previous issue of *The Culture Mandala*.

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[In quotations, 4/26 means **Chapter-4, śloka-26** etc.]

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[In quotations, I/5/1 means **Book-I, Chapter-5, Śloka-1** etc.]

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