Two Texts, One Vision: Kautilya's Arthashastra and Thiruvalluvar's Kural

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Given its multicultural template, the idea of India is built on the principle of 'unity in diversity'. If one puts an excessive emphasis on Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, one is likely to face discontent among varied ethnicities within India regarding the domination of the Sanskrit language. Tamil Nadu, among the southern Indian states, is one region that has a history of preserving its linguistic and cultural identity within the Union of India. The state has witnessed several movements against any one-sided politicized promotion of Sanskrit or the Hindi language by the Union Government or politicians from the northern states of India. Therefore, it is interesting and prudent to compare *Kural,* a cherished text of social and political ethics from the Tamil cultural context, with Kautilya's *Arthashastra,* a representative text of the Sanskrit cultural space, known for its north Indian origins. Both texts deal with the subject matter of statecraft and governance while promoting a particular perspective on 'political morality'. While the ancient Indian traditions of statecraft and governance cannot be attributed to any one text, when we explore multiple texts on statecraft in different Indian subcultures, we find them replete with striking ethical and philosophical similarities.

Kural is one such text that primarily belongs to the Tamil subculture but is a classic example of India's unity in diversity, as despite various distinctions, its ethical and structural understanding of statecraft and governance has striking similarities with Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. These texts are considered to belong to different traditions of the *Arthashastra* (science of wealth) and *Dharmashastra* (treatises on law and ethics). Nonetheless, the political ethics of both the texts converge. In fact, it may be argued that the sections on statecraft and governance in both the texts are reflective of the Indian tradition of *Arthashastra* holding that the ethics of a state (*rajadharma*) is to be perceived and understood differently (holistically) as compared to the limited (partial) ethical frameworks governing personal, social and cultural domains of the common people. While Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is popularly considered a text for the political elites, the *Kural* is more revered among the masses. A complete picture of the Indian perspectives on statecraft and governance is not possible unless we consider both these representative texts of the two living subcultures identified primarily by their linguistic domains (Ramanujan 1970). This article aims to compare Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Thiruvalluvar's *Kural* to illuminate the shared ethical and philosophical undercurrents that traverse the diverse tapestry of India's intellectual heritage, foregrounding 'unity in diversity'.

Kautilya's Arthashastra

Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, variously dated from 4th to 1st century BCE, remained lost and was recovered in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts around 1905 CE. J.J. Myer, who translated the text into German in the 1920s, called it a "Library of Ancient India" (Sarkar 2010). It consists of fifteen books called *adhikaranas* which have sections comprising of prose called *sutra*(*s*), literally meaning, thread, string or clue. The first five books of the text deal with domestic administration, and the next eight resolve the dilemmas of world affairs. The last two books deal with miscellaneous issues, including the rationalist and reflectivist methodologies of knowledge production. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* has a twofold objective. First, it shows how the ruler should protect his territory. For internal governance, the ruler has to ensure that the anarchical conditions of *matsyanyaya* or 'law of the fish' (wherein the strong fish eats the weak fish) is eliminated by the rule of law, and if necessary, by *danda* (punishment) legitimated

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by political virtue (*dharma*). Second, it prescribes how territory should be secured and stabilised: to accomplish this goal, the ruler must look for "the acquisition of (things) not possessed, the preservation of (things) possessed, the augmentation of (things) preserved, and bestowal of (things) augmented on a worthy recipient" (Kangle 2010, 9).

Theoretically, Kautilya's Arthashastra emerges from a well-defined 'philosophy of science' (*anvikshaki*). This philosophy of science involves three metaphysical constructs: Sāṃkhya/'numbers', Yoga/'aggregate', and Lokāyata/'worldly ones'. Sāṃkhya and Yoga accept the infallibility of God, whereas Lokāyata rejects it. Kautilya reconciles these seemingly differing metaphysical divides to support pragmatic or practical politics. In practical politics, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Lokāyata support the following presuppositions. First, the instrument to explore and cope with the worldly reality is 'perception'. Second, the 'self' (as it uses perception to explore and cope with the worldly reality) is interested in defending the 'identity of body and soul': the body-interest (for example, material enjoyment and physical pleasure) and the soul-interest (that is, moral integrity and self-liberation) are 'co-dependent'. Third, in practical politics, the 'identity of body and soul' can be defended through the conditional implementation of a range of moral-ethical doctrines or *dharma*, e.g., material enjoyment, non-injury, truthfulness, not stealing, and altruism.

Praxeologically, the state is to be viewed as an organism with 'seven basic limbs' (*saptanga*): (1) king; (2) council of ministers; (3) countryside; (4) fort; (5) treasury; (6) army; and (7) ally. A proper coordination among these limbs in accordance with the recommended moral-ethical doctrines of material enjoyment, non-injury, truthfulness, not stealing, and altruism can help the ruler to skillfully handle the problems of domestic administration and foreign affairs. Kautilya uses the notion of 'circles of states' (*mandala*) to signify the 'structural layout' of the international system: this layout resembles a set of abstract concentric circles which mark the strategic positioning of individual states in the states-system. Since a potential conqueror state (*vijigisu*) always positions itself at the centre of *mandala*, it mobilizes a six-fold foreign policy (*sadgunya*) to decide its 'functional orientation' vis-à-vis other states. Depending on the momentary strategic positioning of different types of enemy, rival or friendly states, the potential conqueror state has to cautiously implement a six-fold foreign policy towards them: (1) *samdhi*, making a peace treaty with clear terms and conditions; (2) *vigraha*, the policy of antagonism; (3) *asana*, not marching on an expedition; (4) *yana*, marching on an expedition; (5) *samsraya*, looking for shelter with another king; and (6) *dvaidhibhava*, the policy of peace with one king and antagonism with another at the same juncture. The ultimate ends that the ruler aims to achieve in political life include *yogakshema* (survival) and *lokasamgraha* (benefit and happiness of all). These ultimate ends involve both material and spiritual well-being.

In real-life situations, the rulers are likely to face tensions when they aspire to secure the two allegedly conflicting ends of material and spiritual well-being. For Kautilya, the protection of the Earth – or 'long-term visions of a sustainable order' – is the 'superseding principle' to settle the conflicting goals of material and spiritual well-being (Kangle 2010). In a way, Kautilya endorses the ruler's 'non-selfishness' as the supreme behavioural approach for resolving the tussles between material and spiritual duties in political life as he prioritizes the universal ideals of protecting the Earth as a 'necessary condition' for the pursuit of material well-being on Earth.

Contemporary research works on Kautilya's *Arthashastra* show preoccupation with the subject-matter of 'political science': this includes the studies on domestic politics, world politics, diplomacy, military science, intelligence studies, grand strategy, and political philosophy (Gautam, Mishra and Gupta 2015, 2016). Some exploratory projects also emphasize on 'comparative studies' with Western, Chinese, West-Asian, and Indo-Islamic texts, such as those by Machiavelli, Sun Tzu, Nizam al-Mulk, and Zia Barani (Liebig and Mishra 2017). Finally, some recent publications excavate the theoretical and praxeological tenets of Kautilya's writings as a component of the ongoing debates on 'non-Western IR' and 'India's strategic thinking' (see Shahi 2019, Kamal 2023, Mitra and Liebig 2017, Bisht 2020).

Thiruvalluvar's Kural

Thiruvalluvar's Kural belongs to the post-Sangam literature which comprises of Eighteen Minor Works called kilkkanakku (Subbarayalu, 2014, 46). Out of these eighteen minor works, the *Kural* is considered to be a book of lofty wisdom. The term 'Kural' in the Tamil language means 'anything short', indicating brief and concise couplets of wisdom. The text is variously dated between 1st Century BCE to 6th Century CE, and it consists of 1330 couplets

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spread across 133 chapters. C. Rajagopalachari (2017, 24), a proficient litterateur and the last Governor General of India, thought that both Thiruvalluvar and Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor (121-180 CE), were comparable in terms of their emphasis on 'incisive rationalist approaches' and moral elements, including frugalness, just and virtuous dealings, and self-discipline. He further argued that the centrality of the art of persuasive speech in the *Kural* shows that decisions were taken after debate in assemblies in the Tamil community during Thiruvalluvar's time. Takanobu Takahashi (1999), a Japanese Indologist, noted that Thiruvalluvar dealt with virtues in terms of good and not in terms of caste-based duties; when he discussed politics, he addressed simply a man, not a king. *Kural* is regarded as significant as the Bible, Holy Quran, and the Bhagavad Gītā by many. It preaches eternal wisdom in a uniquely non-sectarian way (Rajagopal 2016).

As a classic Tamil poetry that takes into account both 'other-worldly' and 'this-worldly' reality, the *Kural* remains universally applicable across nations, cultures, ethnicities, caste, class, religions, and races. Like *Arthashastra*, the matters of statecraft and governance lie embedded in the *Kural.* It too conceives the seven constituent elements of the state and offers discussions on how to develop them well. The text deals with the issues and challenges of political violence within the purview of the state. It recognises the institution of wars, diplomacy and related concepts and themes. Yet its central argument is towards the enduring values of ethical and moral aspects. In fact, the *Kural* gives more importance to the personal qualities in political life, for instance, the virtues of self-control and character-building. The uniqueness of the text lies in its emphasis on ethical and moral attribute called *aram* (Tamil equivalent of *dharma*) or virtue which is to be implemented at both state and personal levels. One of the verses in the *Kural* specifies that the wealth acquired with knowledge of the proper means and without foul practices will yield virtue and happiness (Drew and Lazarus 2014). Another verse warns: "to seek to further the welfare of the state by enriching it through fraud and falsehood is like storing water in an unburnt mud pot and hoping to preserve it" (Rajagopalachari 2017, 4). The *Kural* at no place, explicitly or implicitly, advances realpolitik arguments such as the 'ends justify means'. The moral and ethical approach of the *Kural* is an important contribution to normative political philosophy.

Of late, the Institute of Asian Studies based in the south Indian city of Chennai has taken research initiatives to engage with the *Kural*. The third International Conference on *Thirukkural* was held at New Delhi in September 2019 with the theme "*Thirukkural* for World Peace and Harmony" (Samuel 2019). A Chinese scholar Zhou Xin, who teaches Tamil language and the *Kural* at Beijing Foreign Studies University in China, in her presentation at the conference explained that the *Kural*'s message of peace and ethics was like that of the ancient Chinese sage Mozi (470-391 BCE). In line with the present call of Global IR to resuscitate the underexplored non-Western knowledge-forms and to find synergies between them, the IR scholars can take up research projects that could perform a comparative study of Thiruvalluvar and Mozi.

Comparing Arthashastra and Kural: The Strategic Thinking of 'Unity in Diversity'

The philosophical edifices of the *Arthashastra* and the *Kural* are rooted in the convergence of the orthodox ancient Indian philosophical schools on *purusharthas* (goals of life). The two texts are framed in the ancient Indic philosophical tradition that emphasizes the balanced fulfilment of three (out of four) fundamental *purusharthas* which are based on the three essential instincts of human existence – i.e. *dharma* (morality and ethics), *artha* (material wealth and economic prosperity), and *kama* (love, desires and expectations). The good life is a perfect balance in the fulfilment of the three, as they cannot be evaded, and suppression or evasion of any of the three creates only problems, not solutions. The Tamil equivalent for *dharma* is *aram* (as mentioned previously), for *artha* is *porul*, and for *kama* is *kamam* or *inbam.* The focus of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is *artha* in the regulatory framework of *dharma*, whereas *Kural* focuses on *dharma* (*aram*) with substantial discussions on the other two.

While Kautilya's *Arthashastra* was rediscovered in parts and made into a critical work by 1960s, the *Kural* was never lost and is a living tradition. In the *Kural*, unlike Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, there is no would-be-conqueror (*vijigisu*) located at the centre of circle of states (*mandala*). Kautilya seems to be more inclined to atheism (since one of the philosophical constructs of Arthashastra called Lokāyata/'worldly ones' or *Charvaka* rejects the infallibility of God), whereas Thiruvalluvar evokes God. Also, a few critics claim that Kautilya's *Arthashastra* professes a strong belief in gender inequalities and hierarchies – that is, the comparative superiority or inferiority of men or women, depending on varying socio-political circumstances, defined in terms of the hierarchical caste system, but the *Kural*, on the other

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hand, is standalone with no controversy about it. It speaks truth to power which Kautilya, in received wisdom, represents. With regard to the similarities between Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Thiruvalluvar's *Kural*, one can notice that the moral-ethical dimensions of *dharma* and *aram* constitute the theoretical and praxeological frameworks of both texts. Both texts mention comparable seven constituents of the state and suggest straightforward methods to achieve national security. In addition to this, both underline that the people and society have to be nurtured and made secure with good life. Finally, both texts have contents worthy of further critical investigation.

India is an old civilization encompassing multiplicity of subcultures. Understandably, the pluralities and distinctions in the idea and narrative of India cannot be denied as there have been strong currents of disagreements between various subcultural spaces. The Sanskrit and Tamil lingual spheres have disagreed at different junctures of Indian history; but then, these disagreements have evolved into a larger awareness of unity in diversity. Crucial here is the recognition that, distinctions are not concrete divisions, and that while diversity is to be celebrated, it is only second to the underlying unity. The *Arthashastra* and *Kural* are two important representative texts influencing the Indian cultural and ethical fabric of life in general and politics in particular. The approaches and subject matter in the two texts reveal a common political philosophy eying for a balance between the promotion of state interest and its duty to maintain peace and order in the interstate system. They deal with subject matters relevant to peace research, environmental ethics and a fundamental understanding of human affairs and its various dimensions giving a fair idea of traditional Indian understanding of these issues. The two texts, despite their distinctions, are windows to ancient traditions of strategy and foreign policy in India.

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