



The References of Environmental Preservation in Kautilya's Arthashastra

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Abstract:

Environment and ecological crisis have been the hottest topics of debates for the last decades. The basic issues of today's environmental awareness for preservation and prevention of its degradation are discernible implicitly in a number of Sutras in Arthashastra, considered to have been written in 4th century B.C. by Kautilya. During the early 20th century Rabindranath Tagore dealt in detail with various aspects of environment in his various writings. Unlike the present day piecemeal and adhoc approach towards the issue ancient Indian environment consciousness was holistic in its approach and it sprang from the Upanishadic gospel 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam', i.e., all the beings of the entire universe belong to the one family. The various injunctions on land use, on do and don'ts, penalties and punishments specified for violation of these, rewards and incentives for proper use etc. demonstrates the awareness developed at that time for the preservation of land as a resource. The nature of land has been given much importance in Arthashastra. The ideal Janpada is the one which was "devoid of mud, stones, salty ground, uneven land....endowed with agricultural land with protected pastures....with farmers devoted to work". It was perceived that "cultivable land is better than mines because mines fill only treasury while agricultural production fills both the treasury and store houses". Natural and man-made calamities can afflict population have been listed in Kautilya's Arthashastra. Kautilya's prescription for disaster management is worth noting, particularly the anticipation of disasters and prior preparation for preventing them as far as possible. First he classifies the disasters caused by nature. Natural calamities are considered as act of God, and prevention of these have been prescribed through worship, oblation and recitals of benediction. Kautilya also prescribes that everyone should be careful about preserving common property and bio-diversity. Otherwise he would be fined. The people are supposed to perform duties towards community living. "Every one shall contribute his share to the building of common facilities. No one shall obstruct or prevent the lawful use of such facilities by others in the neighbourhood.



Environment and ecological crisis have been the hottest topics of debates for the last decades. The basic issues of today's environmental awareness for preservation and prevention of its degradation are discernible implicitly in a number of Sutras in Arthashastra, considered to have been written in 4th century B.C. by Kautilya. During the early 20th century Rabindranath Tagore dealt in detail with various aspects of environment in his various writings.¹ He was inspired from ancient Indian texts: Vedic Samhitas, Upanishads, Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Dharmasastras, and Arthashastra etc. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 defines "Environment includes waters air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human being, other living creatures, plants, microorganisms and property."²

Kautilya's Arthashastra contains a number of sutras scattered over different chapters dealing with various aspects of statecraft and administration, which express awareness of environment comparable to the modern concepts and perception of the subject. Unlike the present day piecemeal and adhoc approach towards the issue ancient Indian environment consciousness was holistic in its approach and it sprang from the Upanishadic gospel 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam', i.e., all the beings of the entire universe belong to the one family.

Self-protection is the basic instinct of the organic world. In the primitive society, nature's gift was obtained in the form as it was offered. With time, land, water, forestland other gifts of land-minerals, building materials etc. received much attention for economic activities with these elements. In Kautilya's Arthashastra, land received much attention, its potentials identified and classified according to the concepts of its being a resource. The various injunctions on land use, on do and don'ts, penalties and punishments specified for violation of these, rewards and incentives for proper use etc. demonstrates the awareness developed at that time for the preservation of land as a resource. The nature of land has been given much importance in Arthashastra. The ideal Janpada is the one which was "devoid of mud, stones, salty ground, uneven land....endowed with agricultural land with protected pastures....with farmers devoted to work" (6.1.8). It was perceived that "cultivable land is better than mines because mines fill only treasury while agricultural production fills both the treasury and store houses" (7.11.10-12).

Kautilya entrusted the task of protecting forests, plants and living creatures- animals, both wild and domestic. "Duties common to all are; abstaining from injury, truthfulness, uprightness, freedom from malice, compassionateness and forbearance" (1.3.13). While general proclamations



were directed to the common people, high ranking officials used to be appointed with specific responsibilities and authority to execute them. Penalties and punishments were specified for violation of edicts.

Animals, particularly horses and elephants were given formidable importance. Cattle, goats, camel, donkeys and pigs, in the crown herd were to be meticulously looked after, for with a chief superintendent of crown herd used to be appointed. The king should protect different types of forests, water reservoirs and mines. And he should establish forests, one each for the products indicated as forest produce. The superintendent of the elephant-forest should, with the help of guards of the elephant-forest, protect the elephant-forest (whether) on the mountain, along a river, along lakes or in marshy tracts, with its boundaries, entrances and exits (fully) known (2.2.4-7). Anyone caught or killing an elephant was to be executed (2.2.9). Killing or injuring animals and birds which were declared as a protected species, in Reserve Park and sanctuaries, were proclaimed as punishable acts (2.26.1-3). Among customarily slaughtered for meat, killing of calf, bull and milk cow was prohibited (2.26.10-11). Harmful and dangerous animals were to be taken out of the sanctuaries and then killed (2.26.14). Stray protected animals or those from reserve forests found grazing at places where they are not supposed to be, should be driven off without hurting them (3.10.31). The herdsmen should be responsible for caring for the young, the old and diseased cattle and treat them when required. Diseased cattle, elephants and horses should be treated by physicians, proper food to be given to them, for which the quality and quantity of ration required to be given were specified. Details of care, training, treatment of horses and elephants, milking of cow etc. have been indicated.³

Thus, much emphasis was given on the rearing, care and protection of forests, gardens, chards-these being considered as sources of revenue, besides being of recreational spots, like parks. The king should protect the product-forests, elephant-forests, irrigation works and mines that were made in ancient times and should start new ones (2.1.39). Kautilya prescribed that appropriate plants should be grown to protect dry lands and pasture lands should be properly protected. Cutting of shoots of flowering or fruit bearing trees, or trees which provides shades was prohibited. Heavy fines and penalties were to be levied for causing harm to trees at the boundaries, sanctuaries, and also the prominent trees (3.19.28-29).

Natural and man-made calamities can afflict population have been listed in Kautilya's Arthashastra. Kautilya's prescription for disaster management is worth noting, particularly the



anticipation of disasters and prior preparation for preventing them as far as possible. First he classifies the disasters caused by nature. There are eight great calamities of a divine origin: fire, floods, disease, famine, rats, wild animals, serpents and evil spirits (4.3.1). Natural calamities are considered as act of God, and prevention of these have been prescribed through worship, oblation and recitals of benediction.

Kautilya prescribes measures for prevention of hazards from flood-situations. During flood which normally happens during the rainy season, the population of the places satiated rivers and water bodies should sift to areas above flood level. There should be elaborate preparedness, by way of collecting wooden planks, bamboos, boats, skin bags, canoes, tree stems, rope braids, hollow gourds-so that these could be utilized for safe transportation away from flooded areas and for rescue operations. Kautilya also emphasizes on mass-participation in rescue works. Strict instructions are therefore attending to rescue operation, and anyone found to be inoperative without valid reason was to be punished (4.3.6-9). The droughts have been identified as greater calamity than excessive rain: The loss of the crops is a greater evil than the loss of sowings, as it involves less of efforts, drought than excessive rain, as it involves loss of livelihood (8.2.25).

Fires, famine, diseases in epidemic form are the other calamities identified as greatly affecting people. flood, it is perceived as more pervasive than fire, since the former carry away hundreds of villages, while the latter burns at most a village or its part (8.4.4). Similarly disease is considered to afflicts only one region and remedies can be found for it, while famine afflicts the whole country and affects livelihood of vast population (8.4.7).

Prevention of fire is explained in Rules for the City Superintendent and in connection with royal possessions in Rules for the Royal Residence (4.3.4). In the summer, citizens shall take appropriate precautions against fire. They shall not light fires during the two middle quarters of the day; if food is to be cooked during this period, it shall be done outside the house. Every household shall provide five pots, a big jar, a trough, a ladder, an axe, a winnowing basket, a hook, a hooked rake and skin bag. During the night, house holders shall stay near the front doors of their houses and shall not collect together (2.36.15-18). If a house catches fire, every occupant owner or tenant shall take immediate steps to put out it.⁴ The City Superintendent was under strict instruction to watch and implement the instructions (2.36.19). “Constant inspection of places, supplying water, roads, water



courses, covered paths, ramparts, parapets and other fortifications and the guarding of what is lost forgotten or has run away are the duties of superintendent (2.36.42).

Kautilya has prescribed the role of the state in famine management. The ruler should have prior preparation for anticipated famines so that he is not caught napping. When the disaster actually occurs, he should take quick measures so as to minimize the harmful effects on the masses. "It is in the interest of the prosperity of the country, a king should be diligent in foreseeing the possibility of calamities, try to avoid them before they arise, overcome those which happen..."⁵ The most interesting aspect in these prescriptions is that the ruler should relinquish if he fails to handle the famine situation. During a famine, the king should make a store of seeds and food-stuffs and afflicted people should be favoured, with food, or provided food-for-work, by way of construction of forts, water works, or should be sheltered with allies or in regions where crops have grown, or settled along the sea, lake or tanks and resorts to fishing, hunting or cultivation along the water works (45.3.17-20).

Kautilya was much concerned about matters pertaining to the preservation of environment and ecology. He prescribed various rules and punitive measures for violation of such rules. In this regard Kautilya's approach was holistic as he considered preservation of environment and ecology as integral parts of human living. Civic duties and responsibilities of every human being, perhaps, are the basic ingredients which offer the initial lessons and generate the higher philosophy of life and living within the wider world comprising all animate and inanimate environments. Harmonious, peaceful and dignified life of people was considered as most desirable and this mode of life was to be valued more than wealth and other worldly acquisitions. It is desired that no one should behave in a manner likely to cause any harm to the immediate neighbourhood (3.20.15). To avoid any inconvenience or confrontation, the house should be constructed in conformity with the demarcated boundaries to be laid with sufficient space between two houses (3.8.3-5); parking space for carts and quadrupeds, a fire-place, water storage arrangements, grinding mill or corn thrashing devices etc. should be placed sufficiently away from a neighbouring house (3.8.11); any construction by way of ditch, outside projecting staircase, ladder, water channel etc. are to be avoided(3.8.21); and for effecting such arrangements house owners, by mutual agreement, may get things done as desired, and should avoid what is undesirable (3.8.18).

Kautilya also prescribes that everyone should be careful about preserving common property and bio-diversity. Otherwise he would be fined (4.10.4-5). No one should do anything to have



harmful external effects on cultivation, irrigation system and other properties of other persons. Violators of this rule would be punished with fines. In case of setting fire to properties of others or common property, or bursting a dam containing water the punishment is death-sentence (3.9.27-31). The people are supposed to perform duties towards community living. “Every one shall contribute his share to the building of common facilities. No one shall obstruct or prevent the lawful use of such facilities by others in the neighbourhood. Such facilities shall not be destroyed.” (3.8.26-27). Sheds, courtyards, latrines, fire places, places for pounding grain and all open spaces are to be used as common property (3.8.28). “No one shall damage plants and trees in city parks, sanctuaries and holy places and cremation grounds, particularly those which bear fruits or flowers or provide shade” (3.19.28-30).

Kautilya prescribes various fines and other punitive measures for polluting the environment by throwing dirt on the roads and highways or voiding urine and faces at public places. No one should throw dirt on the road, or allow mud and water to collect there, which would block the traffic movement; no one shall pass urine or relieve himself in and around holy places, water bodies, a temple, a royal property, unless forced by the effect of medicine, illness or sudden fear; no one shall dispose of dead bodies of domestic pets, like a cat, a dog, carcass of donkey, camel, mule, horse or cattle or a serpent killed anywhere inside the city (2.36.26-30). Human dead bodies shall be cremated or buried only in designated grounds. Corpses are not to be thrown anywhere outside, and should be carried through prescribed routes; violations of these are punishable (2.30.31-33). Water-course, water wells and dung hill should be placed only at specified places suitable for house holders (3.8.6-7). These precautions are obviously meant to prevent air and water pollutions and ensure cleanliness of the surrounding.

The constitution of India initially did not have any direct provision for environmental protection. But after the Stockholm Conference on Environment in 1972 and ever growing awareness of the environmental crisis, the Government of India have to pass various Acts to protect environment and ecology. The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972; Water (Prevention and control of pollution) Act, 1974; the forest (Conservation) Act, 1980; Air (Prevention and control of pollution) Act, 1981; Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and Motor Vehicles Act, 1998 are comparable to the sutras of Kautilya’s Arthashastra. For implementation of the provisions of these Acts, The Central Pollution Control Board at the central level and State Pollution Control Boards at the state levels



were formed in 1988. The Department of Environment, Forest and Wild Life was established in 1985.

The perceptions about the world around man, and on the human attitudes towards nature, as emerge from the sutras in Arthashastra, are certainly contrary to the concept of 'anthropocentric dualism of being and having, namely, to be human and to have everything else at our disposal'.⁶ This concept explains the present state of degradation of environment, consequent upon the uneven economic development of several centuries, and callous human attitudes. The concept of 'co-natural world' which takes into account man's relations to surrounding as integral part and not differentiated separate entities, is implicit in Kautilya's Arthashastra.

In fact, these measures are designed to solve specific problems and do not spring from any basic cosmological and holistic view. So, it has become difficult to coordinate and harmonize various types of activities and agencies designed to protect environment and ecology. These approaches may solve some specific problems pertaining to environment and ecology but would fail to remove the basic cause, which lead to the generation of damage to environment and ecology. In this regard we may learn from the ancient Indian texts like Kautilyas Arthashastra. We are to consider ourselves as a part of the harmonious universe and therefore regulate our material activities in accordance of the rules of nature. This approach towards environment and ecology is likely to generate deeper awareness about these matters among the common people so that they will be more willing to spontaneously co-operate in eco-preserving drives of the government or the NGOs. Kautilyas detailed specifications points out how every measure towards preservation of ecology and environment are coherently integrated.

It is fact that environmental and ecological problems are now more severe and complicated than those at the time of Kautilya. Many aspects of environmental problems were totally absent in those days. The root cause of ecological problems is greed and ignorance and therefore same for all ages. In Kautilyas age, moral preaching were not enough to prevent people from committing eco-damaging activities. So, he specifies punitive measures by the state for violating rules intended to maintain environment and ecology. Another important aspect of Kautilyas prescriptions is that he considers rescue of people from disasters a moral obligation of the ruler and he has no moral right to continue ruling if he fails to manage the disasters in the best possible manner. Kautilya opines that in case it is not possible for the king to manage the disaster in an appropriate manner he must relinquish



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and entrust the country with another more competent king (4.3.17). Although the Ancient Texts may not help in solving specific ecological and environmental problems, but they can give deeper insight into the matter, which will help to solve problems in a more harmonious way.

(All quotations are used from 'The Kautilyan Arthashastra', Kangle, R. P. (1986); Delhi.)

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