# Context is King: Situating the Kautilyan Notion of Sovereignty within India's Strategic Traditions

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Where does the intellectual exercise of tracing the origins of India's strategic history lead us? What motivates researchers and political elite to identify and uphold key values as intrinsic to a state's very existence? In seeking answers to these questions, the paper problematises attempts at theorising state building in India that have leveraged history to address contemporary concerns. They have also led to the essentialisation of national identity that seeks to distill, from the vast diversity of historical experiences, certain basic characteristics that presumably remain unchanged across epochs. Together, these have given us a sanitised version of the Indian state. The paper suggests that one of the ways to address this lacuna is through the process of historicising. It seeks to recover historical contingency by locating Kautilya within the ancient *arthashastra* tradition that upheld the theory of contractual kingship. The paper argues that the significance of Kautilyan philosophy can be grasped by understanding the material and ideational conditions prevalent at that time. More specifically, an appreciation of sovereignty in ancient India would be vital in order to understand state behaviour, diplomatic practices, role of ethics in statecraft (or lack thereof), and practices concerning territoriality. Being attentive to the cultural context of power and political fragmentation, it is argued, would yield a fuller understanding of Kautilya than an essentialist and ahistorical approach would afford.

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Statecraft in India is not about history but many histories that do not necessarily form a coherent whole. Yet, theories seek patterns in state behaviour, diplomatic practices and the role of ethics in statecraft, or lack thereof. In doing so, it is vital to contextualise theoreticians, philosophers and strategists within the times they lived and wrote in. Since Kautilya's views on statecraft have already been analysed at length, the paper takes this existing body of scholarship as its point of departure. It argues that much of the literature on Kautilya within International Relations (IR) is based on the assumption that the roots of Indian strategic thinking can be, and indeed should be, traced back to the ancient period. The search for India's 'pure' essence in the ancient period arose, as Nietzsche puts it 'from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth.' (Drolet, 2004,p. 74) The 'native' acquires central importance in this conceptualisation, and by inference, so does the ancient period to which they were seen as belonging. The ancientness of Indian civilisation, before waves of foreign invasions in the mediaeval and modern

periods 'overrode' it, held intellectual appeal for scholars interested in Indian strategic culture. As the overview of the scholarship below demonstrates, the engagement with the ancient period, and hence, with Kautilya, follows this sustained and recurring pattern. The paper departs from such studies that, by focusing almost exclusively on the man and his times, tend to overlook the larger traditions of strategic thinking, of which Kautilya was but one participant. These traditions did not remain, strictly speaking, ancient but, as we shall observe, witnessed active contributions in the mediaeval period as well. Nor did these traditions remain constant and true to certain core tenets that could be said to be quintessentially Indian or ancient. They evolved as they responded to the changing political conditions. Kautilya, and indeed, the very question of the relevance of his thought, have to be approached in light of both these factors. This paper, hence, attempts to formulate an alter*native* interpretation of his philosophy. One that is historically contingent and which could enrich our theoretical understanding of the shifting significance of sovereignty and power in ancient India and after.

## Theorising by Historicising

It is evident that the scholarship on the issue of India's strategic practice can be arranged along a spectrum. On one extremity of the continuum are scholars who argue that internal disunity and cultural attributes prevented Indians from developing a tradition of strategic thinking of any kind. George Tanham's essay on Indian strategic thought is arguably the most comprehensive contemporary reflection of Orientalist images of India and their strategic significance. (Tanham, 1996) The caricature of a defensive India lacking coherence in strategic thought is reinforced by the contrasting Western case, 'which assume(s) a faith in logic and human progress, the efficacy of individual efforts, a sense of history and continuity, and a future to be shaped and worked for.' (Tanham, 1996, p.43) Tanham argues that the defensive approach, an enduring feature of India's strategic culture, is duly reflected in its foreign policy in the modern era, as it was in the earlier periods. Reinforcing set representations on India, he concludes that 'the forces of culture and history and the attitude and policies of the independent Indian government have worked against the concept of strategic thinking and planning.' (Tanham, 1996, p.75).

Further, there are academics who too are keen on identifying cultural markers but do not necessarily infer strategic incoherence from these. Stephen Rosen, in his attempt to study the influence of domestic social structures on the military effectiveness of states, selected caste as the institution having an enduring influence on Indian military power from the ancient period to the modern era. Rosen contends that caste divisions were duly reflected in Indian armies down ages, and were the cause for their weak military prowess. Projecting caste as an 'objective' criterion, Rosen's is an excessively deterministic view of Indian strategic practice. He asserts, 'Though other social divisions [religious, regional and linguistic] may be overlaid on the system of caste relations, they do not have the same profound impact on day-to-day life...' to the extent that religious divisions have become 'caste-ified.'[1] (Rosen,

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[1] Rosen's argument that 'India is Hindu and Hindus think differently from non-Hindus' becomes the basis of his psycho-analytic study of the 'Hindu personality'. (Rosen 1996, p. 39-41)

1996, pp.33-34) In the same vein, John Hall argues that the caste system provides the overarching template within which the entire Indian history can be explained. Introducing India as 'The Land of the Brahmans' in his book *Powers and Liberties: The Causes and Consequences of the Rise of the West*, Hall asserts that Brahmanism 'blocked the emergence of powerful polities' in India, because of which 'India did not have a political *history*'[2] (Blaut, 2000, p.133).

At the other end of the continuum would be those who contend that Indian strategists showed a decided preference for the realist approach. Studies seeking to refute claims of a defensive India also succumb to the tendency of delineating identifiable attributes that have survived the ravages of history, in this case of an essentially realist approach. A culturally militaristic Indian outlook is located in certain key ancient texts such as the *Arthashastra*, *Manusmriti* and the *Vedas*. Bharat Karnad for instance, contests the caricature of Indians as a culturally defensive people who shirk the use of force, and argues that the texts offer the ruler a gradient of options culminating in war. For Karnad, Indian strategic thinking is characterised by pragmatism that can be traced to the ancient period. History, he asserts, has reiterated the innate Indian proclivity to be calculative and to strategise. However, in tracing its progress down millennia, Karnad reduces the medieval era to being 'the Muslim interregnum' that bridged the ancient and the colonial periods. The contribution of medieval rulers was restricted to changes at the tactical and strategic level, whereas the already established grand strategic framework remained intact. (Karnad, 2002) Andrew Latham contends that the realpolitik thinking introduced by the British further underscored the realist streak in the 'Kautilyan tradition'. This led the Indians to conceptualise security in 'essentially unilateral terms', as opposed to the Western notion of 'mutual' security during the Cold War. In India's case, both traditions emphasised the supremacy of the dominant power to which smaller states were expected to submit. The colonial preoccupation with security as the defence of 'natural' frontiers of the subcontinent is reflected in the Indian concern with all security issues that fall within South Asia. (Latham, 1999) Despite assertions that the Indian security culture cannot be traced back to some 'authentic' pre-colonial tradition', Latham sets out to explore the '[e]ffects of Hindu Norms on Foreign Policy Style'.[3] (Latham, 1999, p.146) Not surprisingly, the familiar Tanhamian interpretation of Indian culture is adopted, emphasising as it does on its hierarchical understanding of international power relations stemming from the ubiquitous caste system. Furthermore, the Hindu concepts of *Karma* and fate allow Indians to accept 'inconsistencies and contradictions' that trouble the Westerners (Latham, 1999).

However, if there is one point that this panoramic view of positions reveals, it is their shared assumption that history and culture can be analysed as a seamless whole, from which validations of contemporary positions can be sought. The

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[2] For Hall, the absence of political traditions accounted for long periods of statelessness and chaos in India. Blaut notes that while Hall regards the lack of a strong state in India as a sign of political weakness, the absence of absolute imperialism in Europe's history becomes a laudable trait. (Blaut 2000, p. 134)

[3] Latham goes to the extent of asserting that the Kautilyan tradition prevents Indian decision-makers from exploring shared interests with Pakistan that could become the basis for initiating Confidence Building Measures. (Latham 1999, p. 150)

tendency to collapse the past into the present remains deeply problematic. This perhaps explains the incongruity as to why IR scholarship in India has progressed little despite the burgeoning literature on culture studies.

## The Realist and Moralist Traditions

An alternative reading of Kautilya that begins by historicising sovereignty and diplomacy in ancient India reveals not one but many histories of strategic practice. Two strategic traditions are discernible in Indian strategic thought, the realist and the moralist. Both traditions were based on two conflicting notions of the state (a parallel engagement with heroism and prudence). It is notable that neither tradition was restricted to the ancient period. These traditions are best seen as successful and optimal responses to the challenges to state power prevalent at a particular time. In Indian strategic thought, the realist tradition that focused on the calculated acquisition and exercise of power is juxtaposed with the moralist tradition, which stressed on the ethical dimensions of power such as peace and justice. (Brekke, 2006) Notwithstanding their contrasting articulations, both traditions converge at certain points in terms of the implications these held for social order and stability. Both seek to socially contextualise kingship in ways that make the institution indispensable to the preservation of social order. They also offer conceptualisations of stability not bound by territoriality but predicated on measures that obviate the use of force.

The two traditions were in a way responding to the prevailing political climate in ancient India. Political fragmentation was the norm during the ancient and mediaeval periods, but this however did not imply political chaos as is commonly assumed. Indeed, although ancient India was fragmented into multiple kingdoms, the political landscape formed a chequered board on which Kautilya based his well-developed network of alternating relations of alliance and enmity. Sovereignty in India was a nebulous concept that did not entail the clear demarcation of the king's political realm. Since theoretically, the authority of the king was universal (given that he was seen as the microcosm of the entire cosmos), making a distinction between the internal and the external domains was self-limiting. The logic of the all-encompassing authority of the king extended to the use of force as well. A dualistic understanding of the use of force (of seeing internal violence as sedition and external force as war) was likewise absent in Indian theorisations. Thus, the strategies employed in the war against external enemies were similar to those against internal opponents (Brekke ,2006).

The two traditions trace their lineage to two conflicting notions of the state that are expounded in classical texts. The *Arthashastra* tradition that refers to a rich body of literature comprising texts such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Kamandaki's *Nitisara* and the *Barhaspatya Sutra* stresses the centrality of the outcome, thereby making the use of ethical and unethical means justifiable. The *Ramayana's* 6000 references to military action potentially qualify it as yet another treatise of the *Arthashastra* tradition. The taxonomy of military strategies of conciliation, bribery, sowing dissension and coercion in the *Ramayana* coincides with the broader classification arrived at by Kautilya. (Brekke, 2006) These texts conceive of the state as a managerial, unitary and bureaucratised entity capable of attaining power (*artha*). Kautilya's 'circle of kings' was one such response, given the fractured political

environment he wrote in. The decline in the use of military strategies, prudence in war, and the dominance of the notion of chivalry extolling death in war is regarded by some researchers as the causes behind the inability of Hindus to effectively oppose the invading Muslim armies. Yet, the discourse on prudence was not altogether overshadowed by the moralist tradition, which the *dharmashastra* literature in the Middle Ages was part of. Somadeva Suri, a Jain teacher upheld prudence over heroism in his work, *Yashastilaka*. The notion of treacherous warfare (*kuta yuddha*), which is denounced in the *dharmashastra* literature as unethical, is advocated by Somadeva, and is indeed one of the underlying principles of the *Arthashastra* theory. (Brekke, 2006) The ancient *Arthashastra* tradition upheld the theory of contractual kingship and stressed the centrality of the outcome, thereby espousing an instrumentalist approach to justice.

Extant epics and Vedic texts are significant to our discussion of Kautilya here especially given their rich repertoire of incisive references to military and political affairs, strategizing and war-making. A notable attribute of India's philosophical literature (taken to be the mainstay of its culture by strategic culturalists) is the marked paucity of treatises devoted to military affairs. If a researcher were to embark upon a search for historical military texts, she would come upon few other than the *Arthashastra*. (Lal, 2003) That the bulk of such material is couched in ostensibly religious and sacred literature perhaps indicates a self-conscious desire to define security in holistic terms.

A response strategy at wide variance with Kautilya's calculative king focused on the just ruler whose primary role was to maintain the rule of *dharma* on which his society was based. In this alternative conception, the basis of kingship is primarily ethical and religious (*dharma*) supported by a network of personal relationships. (Stein, 1975; Singh,1995) The moralist tradition sought to differentiate between the enemy and the conflict situation and placed a high premium on moral concerns which eventually were to inform the conduct of war.

While the tradition's engagement with the discourse on justice and ethical conduct is traceable to the ancient period, what is worth noting is its sustained preoccupation with these concerns in the mediaeval period as well. The *akhlaq* literature needs to be seen as an extension of this sensibility as its normative underpinnings undoubtedly draw from the stock of moralist writings that preceded it. The *akhlaq* tradition of the mediaeval period upheld the notion of procedural justice. The entire state apparatus was to be devoted to the pursuit of a liberal conception of justice, understood as a dynamic state of harmonious balance in society among contending groups. The texts as part of the *akhlaq* literature relied on religious arguments to gain credibility while attempting at the same time to redefine the norms governing kingship and political norms. They presented an essentially non-Islamic political discourse in Islamic terms, drawing on the established and widely recognised grammar of religion (*din*) and the *Sharia*.

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from the central tenets of the classical tradition followed in Islamic law books. For instance, the *Akhlaq-i-Humayuni* despite affirming the importance accorded to religion in the *Sharia*, effectively challenges the narrow role ascribed by it to the king as a Muslim ruler concerned primarily with the interests of the Muslim community. (Alam, 2000) Alam observes that the objective of the treatises was, 'to provide cures for 'character defects'...and thus prepare healthy individuals to develop a stable social order....The *akhlaq* literature, thus represents some of the best examples of appropriation in the medieval Muslim intellectual world, of otherwise non-Islamic (and strictly juristically, in some instances, even anti-Islamic) ideas.' (Alam, 2000,p.67)

This is significant since it implied conforming to the norms of righteous behaviour expected of victors as enumerated in ancient Sanskrit texts, which the early Muslim rulers did. For instance, the notion of *dharmavijaya* stating that the vanquished ruler should be reinstated in his kingdom upon his defeat was generally observed by victorious Muslim kings. Upon eliciting formal submission and a consent to pay the stipulated tribute, the Muslim rulers left the domain of the defeated king largely undisturbed. (Hardy, 1998) It led Burton Stein to characterise the mediaeval Indian state as 'custodial' since it did not 'arrogate to itself and attempt to monopolise the coercive functions and authority of other, essentially non-political institutions in society.' (Stein, 1975,p.76) The literature propounded a rational view of justice, according to which its latent virtues were revealed to human understanding through reason. This assertion of *akhlaqi* norms was significant for they ceased to draw their relevance and sustenance from any religious interpretation but were upheld for their intrinsic value. Justice was understood in *akhlaq* literature to imply a dynamic state of harmonious balance in society among contending groups. The entire apparatus of the state and its resources were to be devoted to the pursuit of this secular conception of justice.

What is noteworthy about this genre is that it couched radical notions in politically and religiously acceptable terms that made the pursuit of universal principles like justice and peace a commendable exercise. The Mughals unreservedly drew upon this tradition of liberal writings, which not only offered the king practical injunctions in matters of statecraft, but crucially moulded their disposition towards accommodation and conciliation. The liberal tradition's most committed proponent, Mughal prince Dara Shukoh (1615-59) considered Hinduism and Islam to be complementary and compatible. Dara argued that complementarities emerge from the religious principle of monotheism that is upheld in all the holy books, including the Bible, the Quran and the Vedas. Of all the holy books, the religious truth was to him most well-enunciated and explicit in the Upanishads and for that very reason was to serve as a template to better understand the Quran. Dara's thesis of grasping the essence of the Quran with the aid of a Hindu scripture was a radical notion that challenged the self-referential nature of Islam. (Friedmann, 2003).

## Interpreting the Duality of Power

Ethics of war in ancient India, thus, came to be shaped by a parallel engagement with the traditions of heroism and prudence. The near simultaneous interest in contrasting types is evident in the growth of both the *dharmashastra* and the *arthashastra* literatures. Whereas the former stressed on the ethical behaviour

expected of a king, the latter served as injunctions to the ruler regarding the conduct of statecraft.

The dicotomy between the two traditions is reflected in the contrasting genres of literature that contained these ideas. The tradition stressing on *dharma* was chiefly located in epic literature, as against the genre of writing emphasising prudence which found expression in the literature on statecraft. (Brekke, 2006) Unlike the Christian tradition which was specifically engaged with the just war theory, the *dharmashastra* tradition believed that the ethics on warfare were informed by the duties of the ruler, and as such were part of the larger scheme of *rajadharma*. The enlightened ruler, who was aware of the ethical dimensions of violence, was endowed with divine attributes that enabled him to wield his power to wage war with discretion. The king in India was seen as an extension of God and as such was bestowed with the attributes of the divine cosmos.[4] His authority was distinct from that of his European counterpart whose right to rule was a conferment by God. The rationale behind vesting warfare with the significance of kingship duties rests on the concept of *karma yoga*. *Karmayoga* elevates the status of warfare to the level of a sacrifice expected of a virtuous ruler. The *Mahabharata* saw the war as a sacrificial act (*yuddha yagna*), aspects of which were comparable to those of a conventional sacrifice. (Brekke, 2006) The constraints on the power of the king were in some senses unique to the Indian notion of kingship itself.

Notwithstanding the duality of power in terms of the temporal and the religious domains in the Christian and Muslim world, both realms were located within the same social sphere. In contrast, the Indian worldview restricted the authority of the king by postulating the sphere of renunciation over which he had little control but which legitimised his divine status in the temporal realm. The *brahmin*, by renouncing the social sphere, stood independent of it, because of which his sphere lay beyond the grasp of the king.[5] The contradiction between the circumscribed powers of the king and the structure that he was to have the final word on matters of *dharma* can be explained in terms of the amorphous nature of *dharma* itself. However great its appeal, the application and observance of *dharma* required the institutionalised support of an organisational apparatus, which the king alone could provide (Heesterman, 1998).

As opposed to the *dharmashastra* literature, which supported divine kingship, the *arthashastra* genre upheld the theory of contractual kingship, stressing on resorting to war in order to attain state objectives such as security. According to

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[4] Manu articulated the divine authority of the king, 'For when this world was without a king and people ran about in all directions out of fear, The Lord emitted a king in order to guard his entire (realm), taking lasting elements from Indra, the Wind, Yama, the Sun, Fire, Varuna, the Moon, and (Kubera) the Lord of Wealth. Because a king is made from particles of these lords of the gods, therefore he surpasses all living beings in brilliant energy, and, like the Sun, he burns eyes and hearts, and no one on earth is able even to look at him'. (Cited in Brekke 2006: 116)

[5] Before the asvamedha yagna (a Vedic ritual sacrifice) commences, the king and the brahmin ritually exchange their qualities. The king temporarily forsakes his royalty to the brahmin who in turn bequeaths him with his power of brahminhood. The symbolic alternation enables the king to withdraw to a life in the wilderness befitting an ascetic, while the brahmin assumes charge of the temporal sphere. (Heesterman 1998: 33-34)

Kautilya, '*Artha* is the source of the livelihood of human beings, in other words, the earth inhabited by men. The science which is the means of the attainment and protection of that earth is the *Arthashastra*.' (Kautilya, 1923,pp. 1-2) A template of twelve kings makes up Kautilya's mandala theory arrayed along alternating zones of alliance and hostility. The existence of twelve kings is not a necessary precondition for the mandala logic to work; instead, they personify the entire range of relationships that are likely to emerge with the conqueror's attempts at expansion (Kangle, 1965).

Consequently, war was not a sacrificial act validated by honourable intentions and just means, but was one of the many courses available to the king to achieve other ends. Other than expansion by conquest, Kautilya also envisaged settlement on unoccupied territory (*sunyanivesa*) as a mode of spreading the imperial frontiers. Although unoccupied territory was in principle the domain of the king, facilitating the formation of villages on virgin lands was postulated as a significant state activity. (Kangle,1965) Kautilya's emphasis on expediency often entailed winning the support and confidence of conquered people. He counselled the granting of considerable degrees of local autonomy and to leave local power structures in conquered areas undisturbed to facilitate a peaceful transition. Peace and even neutrality in war was to be preferred as it entailed the most judicious use of state resources. That said, even in peacetime, every state should be prepared for war and for which no means were to be spared.

## Interpreting Kautilya within International Relations

Kautilya, and indeed, Indian traditions of statecraft, confound conventional assumptions within IR. Traditional givens pertaining to sovereignty, anarchy and the use of force find little resonance in ancient and medieval contexts. While it is a well-established fact that notions of sovereignty and anarchy were closely associated with the rise of the modern state system, a look at the ancient Indian political context would enrich this growing body of literature on how such concepts can be theorised differently.

So, in what ways does Kautilyan philosophy compel us to nuance our understanding of international relations? Kautilya certainly refrained from making a stark demarcation between the internal and external realms of a state. Instead, what was central to his calculation was the proximity of the enemy, evident from his assertion that 'the *janapada* [kingdom] is shared with the enemy.' Given that the domain of the king is not clearly demarcated, the strategies Kautilya suggested were thus the same for dealing with both internal sedition and external invasion. Since the enemy existed both within and beyond a king's domain, strategists like Kautilya and Manu did not advise the use of force as the primary state instrument. Indeed, coercion was less favoured than sedition in terms of potency and effectiveness in countering enemies. The reason behind force being attributed less significance lay in the nebulous nature of sovereignty. As Andre Wink notes, 'The conquest which is desired by the conqueror-to-be is not primarily a matter of military action, but of expansion of his sovereignty or *svavisaya* by effecting alliances with 'those who are likely to be won over' under the enemy's sovereignty or *paravisaya*.' (1986,p. 15)

Adam Watson, a member of the British Committee, hailed the *Arthashastra* for being a 'major theoretical analysis of international relations as an integral part of the problems of statecraft', a fusion unparalleled in contemporary history. (Watson, 1992,p. 79) Kautilya's distinction between the mediatory king (*madhyama*) and

the neutral king (*udasina*) is a sign of political sophistication, which '...may be the first instance in a text of the concept of neutrality, and of the steps which a conqueror or someone resisting conquest should adopt towards a neutral state. No such distinctions between a mediator and a neutral power are to be found in the writings of the near east or Greece; and the European system rarely got beyond allies, enemies and neutrals.'[6] (Watson, 1992, p. 81).

Since kingship in the *Arthashastra* was not concerned with divinity, the power to wage war was released from the logic of *dharma* and the attendant duties expected of the virtuous king. Watson points out that for Kautilya, '...the end of power was not the service of the gods or an ideology, but the happiness of the state. He believed...that a multitude of interdependencies was not the most desirable state of affairs, and that on the contrary greater happiness could be attained by establishing a benevolent imperial rule. It is curious that from the *Arthashastra* to the American Declaration of Independence (which opposes imperial rule) no other text puts the pursuit of happiness quite so high.' (Watson, 1992, p. 83).

Further, the dichotomy between anarchy and hierarchy as corresponding to the external and internal realms was not reflected in ancient Indian politics. Political fragmentation was the norm during the ancient and mediaeval periods, but this however did not imply political chaos as is commonly assumed. Indeed, although ancient India was fragmented into multiple kingdoms, the political landscape formed a chequered board on which Kautilya based his well-developed network of alternating relations of alliance and enmity. Sovereignty in India was a nebulous concept that did not entail the clear demarcation of the king's political realm. Since theoretically, the authority of the king was universal (given that he was seen as the microcosm of the entire cosmos), making a distinction between the internal and the external domains was self-limiting. The logic of the all-encompassing authority of the king extended to the use of force as well. A dualistic understanding of the use of force (of seeing internal violence as sedition and external force as war) was likewise absent in Indian theorisations. Thus, the strategies employed in war against external enemies were similar to those against internal opponents. (Brekke 2006: 120-121)

The necessity of tackling numerous, dispersed and well-entrenched adversaries had a profound influence on the evolution of strategic traditions in India. Both the realist and moralist traditions wrestled with multiple-actor scenarios that fashioned multifaceted response strategies. Although both differed in terms of the goals that the state was expected to pursue and the means it was to adopt in their pursuit, the two traditions advocated a calibrated use of force. Force was to be a measure of last resort exercised only after all other options had been exhausted. Thus, it is not surprising that references to the use of brute force at the outset of an adversarial situation are rare in ancient Indian texts belonging to both schools. The Kautilyan emphasis on alliance-building through the *mandala* theory rather than a total reliance on indigenous military capability also reflected the preference for collaborative strategies. (Watson, 1992) Ancient India as a conglomeration of many

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[6] The mediatory king was one whose territory lay close to both the conqueror and his immediate enemy and who was noncommittal but powerful enough to determine the balance of power within the circle of states. The territory of the neutral king lay beyond this primary set of kings, but who was also sufficiently powerful to either resist or assist the conqueror, his enemy and the mediatory king. (Watson 1992: 80)

warring kingdoms presented an ambitious ruler with a political scenario that could potentially dissipate his resources and energies through constant war-making. The most efficient response strategy emphasised accommodation and alliance-building.

On the continuum of kingship, that at one end attributes independent divine qualities to the king such as in ancient Egypt, and on the other regards him as a worldly instrument of the divine force as in ancient China and mediaeval Europe, the position of the Hindu king falls somewhere in the middle. While he was to submit to the writ of *dharma*, he presided over his kingdom as its supreme power. His kingdom was seen as a microcosm of the grand cosmic order. It was believed that the Cosmic Man who generates the universe, and into whom all its elements must return to be regenerated in cyclic alternation, also creates the king with portions taken from the eight deities of the cosmos. Constituted with the radiance and power of the cosmos, the divinity of the Hindu king is inherent in his person and not bestowed by divine right as in mediaeval European philosophy. The centrality of the Cosmic Man within the cosmos is replicated in the king who is the font of power, order and creation within his kingdom. The claims of Hindu kings over a universal dominion drew from this conception of the kingdom as containing within it all the elements of the entire earth. (Inden, 1998)

However, the status and authority of the king within his kingdom differ in the Hindu and Islamic traditions. While the Hindu tradition vested the king with the divinity drawn from the gods, this replication of the cosmic power in the king is absent in Islamic thought. The latter chooses instead to remind the king of his instrumental status in the scheme of things. Peter Hardy observes the Islamic tradition, 'It is not by reason of his being, but by reason of his behaviour, that the sultan becomes the means whereby subjects enjoy welfare. The real agent is god.' (Hardy, 1998,p. 228) Thus, by inference, the authority of the king under Islam is vested in him by God whose divine attributes cannot be replicated in any of his creations, and hence no mortal can aspire to reflect His powers in this temporal world.

Power, therefore, was not traditionally conceived in purely political terms but was inextricably linked to ritual authority. The king was not only the head of the temporal realm but was also seen as the microcosmic embodiment of all elements of the universe. His position was at once circumscribed and sacred, and thus the location of the Indian state within society was far more complex than that of its European counterpart. This complexity yielded a commensurate emphasis on the material and the ideational dimensions of power in both genres. Thus, we find Kautilya cautioning his king against neglecting the power of symbolism that was recognised and acknowledged by his subjects. Such a layered understanding of power also meant that force was seen as one of the many means available to a ruler. This served to nudge rulers into exploring moderation in conflicts as a common strategy. Issues of security remained recessed within broader issues of stability and good life and often implied that these were couched in acceptable terms. For instance, the notion of balance, whether personified in the king or implemented as a calibrated response to a conflict situation, frequently came to the fore in Indian politics. (Inden, 2006) Although the modern Indian state conceives of its security in primarily militaristic terms, its emphasis on rhetoric and lofty ideals echoes the compelling need to seek a social and ethical justification of security.

Cultural replication and ritual sovereignty were vital processes of state formation in Asian polities, which extended beyond the state's formal institutions. The western notion of the state monopoly of force needs to be problematised, since historically Asian polities were akin to intercontinental empires, unlike Europe's nation-states. Susanne Rudolph suggests an alternative framework of a custodial state ruling over the various mechanisms of a 'self-regulating' society such as castes, regions and religious communities. Indian grand strategies of any hue, whether accommodationist, offensive or defensive, sought to undergird the notion of security within the larger normative framework of a good life, harmony and stability. Importantly, the ethical underpinning of security resonated well with the image of the king as the keeper of societal values and the balancer of conflicting forces. At the operational level, the wide array of strategies at the disposal of the state was logical, given the diverse and diffuse nature of threats to its security. While none of the prescribed measures was in any way uniquely Indian, a taxonomy that prioritised negotiation, compromise and sedition over the resort to force has endured as an abiding feature of India's strategic practice.

This is not to tow the much-favoured culturalist line of argument that Indians are culturally programmed to exhaust options of peaceable co-existence. The claim that political fragmentation was a regressive condition in India that led to chaos can be traced to the normative appeal of the modern state for its absolute control over territory. Fragmented territories with fungible boundaries were the prevalent norm in the ancient and mediaeval periods and were hardly unique to India. Both strategic traditions directed the king to vanquish and not annihilate his enemies, quite simply because there were too many to engage within futile and costly endeavours. Leaving the domain of the vanquished ruler undisturbed in return for his submission was an eminently desirable political arrangement. Thus, we see the familiar picture of the king withdrawing to rule from his designated capital after extracting the assurance of recognition and submission from the local ruler. (Rudolph, 1987) The *modus operandi* was in no way idealistic and politically naïve; just very practical and well-suited to the conditions that ambitious kings had to deal with.

This paper will probably leave many questions unanswered, particularly those pertaining to the existing status of the strategic traditions mentioned above. Tracing traditions across eras is no less hazardous than delineating the essential elements of a strategic culture down history. Culture transmutes and transforms in every age. To assume that a single culture operated for the whole of India or that there existed no tradition of strategic thinking are dangerous propositions. Traditions last because the conditions supporting them do; they change or recede when those conditions are radically transformed. A tradition that suited the imperatives of a particular time period did not appear appropriate in another, causing it to recede behind a more astute strategy. The interplay of these response strategies is rooted in culture insofar as the language and the metaphors employed belonged to a particular cultural milieu. (Hudson, 1997) The cultural tropes and practices resorted to for the legitimation of power are resonant of a certain way of life unique to that societal context alone.

History, in that sense, permits us to conceptualise culture in dynamic terms. One can put forward a set of tentative assumptions on how culture may have impacted strategic thinking in India. It gradually gave rise to a consciousness of the antiquity of the country, and this awareness was reflected in myriad ways in the writings of

different ages. For instance, rulers through history routinely exalted the greatness of this land, the conquest of which was seen as a feat of the mighty. It has variously been described as the land of plenty inhabited by people with the pleasing countenance. The appeal had a lot to do with the fertile plains in the north and the trade routes that Indians straddled. But the association of the subcontinent with significance, enormity and achievement was an abiding subject of interest for writers in ancient, mediaeval and colonial India. The consciousness assumed patriotic dimensions under the nationalists who took recourse to history to demonstrate their pride and loyalty to the country.

The question that naturally emerges out of this appraisal pertains to how history is supposed to correct the skewed picture. Three reasons for adopting a historical approach come to mind. Firstly, historical contingency acts as a check against essentialist interpretations of state behaviour of the kind that is typical of many writings in culture studies today. This is where contextualism comes into the picture when we undertake to study the impact of ideas. (Lawson, 2006) As the history of ideas has shown us, not only were concepts imparted different meanings, but they also moulded identities differently. Secondly, historical contingency allows greater room for critical perspectives to emerge and find a voice within the discipline. This is especially critical in the case of postcolonial societies such as India where colonialism has left an indelible mark on the processes of state- and identity formation. A contingent approach allows the researcher to problematise many of the cultural tropes that were accepted as naturalised verities. Placing them in historical context would reveal the undercurrents of power that led these caricatures to emerge and the manner in which they were legitimised within the colonial discourse. Thirdly, a historical perspective enables the theorist to better explain the manner in which the sovereign state system evolved out of a system of imperial orders. (Buzan, 2006) The empire occupies the central position in this study, both as a theoretical concept in which the internal and the external domains often overlapped, and as an empirical case study on the manner in which power and political control were constantly negotiated in history. (Barkawi &Laffey 2002) The notion of the empire allows for a more historically 'deep' discipline that is representative of the political experiences of the non-Western world. It also reveals the mutually constitutive elements of what has so far been considered a formal interaction between the imperial power and the colony during the nineteenth and twentieth century. (Hardt & Negri 2000) If history matters, as do the contingent forms that political units may take from time to time, then the study of empires in the time span of a country's evolving strategic practice is both logical and necessary. The emphasis on the sovereign state system tended to marginalise one of the most enduring political systems in history from the discourse on international politics. The study of imperial systems would make the history of IR more representative and balanced.

This once again brings to the fore the compelling need to locate supposedly 'neutral' notions within historical contexts. Concepts such as power and hegemony hold little meaning outside their socio-historical context, and to attribute contemporary connotations to these would be fallacious. For instance, the theorist needs to be attentive towards the manner in which actors exercise 'different *forms* of power (authority, force, care, and so on) through different *expressions* (linguistic, symbolic, material, and so on) to *produce* different social realities.' (Mattern, 2004,p.

345) The philosophy of history holds important lessons for the IR theorist here. The history of ideas enables the researcher to go back in time sans the baggage of loaded contemporary meanings and concepts. (Skinner, 2002) The connotations that the thinkers of antiquity implied may have long since disappeared, but a historical enquiry reaffirms the fact that the evolutionary path of a particular notion was neither linear nor inevitable. It offers an important corrective to IR theory, which often associates concepts with a timeless and eternal quality. The tendency to mine history for substantiations of our contemporary concerns also stems from such contrived linkages with the past. (Gunnell, 1978)

The dramatic transformation in India's case came with the advent of colonialism that, barring the brief period of lingering influences following the transfer of power, marked the sundering of existing power relations among the indigenous elite. Technological advancements coupled with the colonial overlay redefined the whole notion of the empire and the manner in which it came to be administered. (Shaw, 2003) The empire was now more organised and elaborate than its ancient and mediaeval manifestations, and increasing regularisation in the functioning of the state apparatus implied that projecting power over distances was no longer the challenge it had been in the past. The two traditions may have effectively receded into the past but the debates they spawned on state-society relations, the legitimacy of force and principles of governance have only served to enrich our understanding of India's strategic history.

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