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## **Ancient Statecraft and Modern Security Policy: The Contemporary Relevance of Kautilya's Spy Theory**

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### **Abstract**

The title of this research paper is *Ancient Statecraft and Modern Security Policy: The Contemporary Relevance of Kautilya's Spy Theory.*" The main objective of this study is to analyze the theoretical foundation and practical structure of the spy system in ancient Indian political thought and to make a comparative evaluation of it with the intelligence system of modern India. The ancient Indian political thinker Kautilya in his famous treatise Arthashastra presented a well-organized and multidimensional spy system, which appears as an effective means to ensure state security, administrative control, and the welfare of the subjects.

The intelligence structure of contemporary **India** is technology-based, institutional, and multifaceted. Modern intelligence agencies play an important role in internal security, border protection, counter-terrorism, and strategic information gathering. Although methodological differences can be observed due to the changes in time and context, a certain continuity can still be noticed between the ancient and modern systems in terms of these fundamental principles— information-based administration, covert operations, and multidimensional surveillance.

Through historical analysis and a comparative method, this research attempts to demonstrate that Kautilya's spy theory is not only an example of ancient political wisdom but also remains relevant and influential in the field of security policy of the modern state system. Therefore, both the relationship and the differences between ancient and modern intelligence systems are considered important subjects of discussion in the fields of political science and security studies.

**Keywords:** Kautilya's Spy Theory, Arthashastra, Intelligence Systems, National Security Policy, Comparative Political Analysis

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### **Introduction:**

In ancient Indian politics, espionage was an essential component of state administration. In the Rigveda, there is mention of the spies of Varuna, and in the Atharvaveda, references are found to the thousand-eyed spies of Soma and Varuna. Spies collected internal and external information of the state, learned about the strength and weaknesses of the enemy, and assisted the king in taking necessary measures. 'In the Mahabharata, it is said that kings saw through the eyes of four-eyed spies'.<sup>1</sup> Vyasa advises that the king should verify the reports of three separate and unknown spies before making a decision. Kalidasa called spies the rays of light of the kingdom, and 'Bharavi advised appointing capable, trustworthy, and progressive persons as spies'.<sup>2</sup>

In ancient literature, there are many synonyms for a spy – *Shukranitisara* uses the term 'gūḍhācāra', the *Arthashastra* uses 'gūḍhapuruṣa'; besides these, terms such as *chara*, *chāra*, *praṇidhi*, and *apasarpa* are also used. The sages described the qualifications of a spy – he should be capable of uncovering the faults of others but keep his own identity concealed; he should gain the trust of the enemy and, if necessary, create dissension; yet he should remain virtuous, trustworthy, and loyal to the king. In the *Kamandaka Nitisara* and the *Arthashastra*, it is mentioned that a spy should be intelligent, possess a good memory, understand signals, speak sweetly, be skilled in disguise, and be knowledgeable about different countries, languages, and customs'.<sup>3</sup> The king should test their loyalty and give honor and remuneration to the deserving ones.

Spies were employed either permanently or temporarily; sometimes they worked in the guise of a fisherman, cowherd, hunter, or ascetic. "In the *Mahabharata*, the incident of learning about the position of Duryodhana through a fisherman is an example of this."<sup>4</sup> In the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya mentioned various disguises and the 'Panchasamsthā' (Kāpaṭika, Udashita, Gṛhapati, Vaidehaka, Tapasa) categories of spies.

During the Maurya Empire, the spy system was particularly organized. In order to keep the administrative system functioning in the vast empire, surveillance over ministers, officials, and provinces, as well as the collection of information about neighboring kingdoms, was essential. As a result, spies were considered important assistants of the central administration, and the security of the state depended on their vigilance, loyalty, and efficiency.

### **Necessity of Spies:**

Although the king conducted administration with the assistance of ministers, *amatyas*, and departmental heads, it was necessary to maintain control over their activities. Since they possessed considerable power, there was also the possibility of its misuse. For the purpose of protecting the rights of the subjects and maintaining administrative discipline, Kautilya established a well-organized intelligence department.

According to ancient Indian political thinkers, the primary duty of the king was to serve the subjects and ensure their welfare. To fulfill this objective, it was essential for the king to know accurate and continuous information about the daily lives of the subjects, the impact of administrative policies, the defects of the system of governance, the sense of duty of officials, and individuals or groups creating unrest within the state. By being aware of the causes of the happiness and suffering of the subjects, the king could ensure effective governance. From this necessity the development of the spy system in ancient India took place.

In the Arthashastra, Kautilya described the spy system as essential for the king and discussed in detail its organization, methods of operation, and responsibilities. Compared with other political scholars of ancient India, Kautilya is unique in his clear and detailed analysis of the spy system. He provided descriptions of different types of spies based on their duties and purposes.

### **Types of Spies:**

In the state system of ancient India, spies were an essential part of the administration. Just as there were various classes and professions of people in society, there was also diversity among spies. "Acharya Kautilya, in his *Arthashastra*, made a systematic classification of spies according to their functions and positions. He mentioned a total of nine types of spies and mainly divided them into two categories – (a) stationary or institutional spies and (b) roaming or mobile spies."<sup>5</sup>

#### **(a) Stationary or Institutional Spies**

"Those who worked in an organized manner while staying in a fixed place and were permanently appointed within the administration were known as institutional spies. The first five types of spies were called by Kautilya the Panchasamsthā."<sup>6</sup> They were considered worthy of special honor and reward from the king.

**1) Kapātika Spy:** "Kapātikas usually assumed the disguise of a student or an educated person. They were clever, intelligent, and capable of understanding the thoughts of people. Their main task was to observe the activities of ministers or high officials by remaining close to them."<sup>7</sup> If they noticed any conspiracy, corruption, or anti-state activity, they secretly informed the king. Through the Kapātikas, the king verified the internal purity of the administration.

**2) Udasthita Spy:** "Udasthitas moved in society in the disguise of ascetics or religious devotees. They mingled with farmers, cattle-rearers, merchants, and ordinary people and observed their activities. They reported on how administrative policies were affecting the subjects and whether dissatisfaction or disorder was arising anywhere."<sup>8</sup> Their work was to collect political information under the cover of religion.

**3) Gṛhapātika Spy:** "Gṛhapātikas lived in villages in the guise of poor farmers. They collected information regarding agricultural production, the amount of land, tax collection, and the attitudes of the subjects. Creating loyalty among farmers towards the king and warning in advance about the possibility of rebellion were their important duties."<sup>9</sup>

**4) Vaidehaka Spy:** Vaidehakas stayed in commercial centers in the guise of merchants or traders. They collected information about market prices, revenue, import-export, mineral resources, and industries. Keeping the merchant community in favor of the king and providing information about the economic strength of the enemy were their main tasks. Their role in maintaining economic security was very important.<sup>10</sup>

**5) Tāpas Spy:** Tāpasas stayed in the capital or important regions in the guise of shaven-headed or matted-haired ascetics. They pretended to practice penance while secretly collecting information. Because of their religious status, common people and the elite did not easily suspect them. As a result, they could easily obtain secret information.<sup>11</sup>

#### **(b) Roaming or Mobile Spies**

Spies of this category carried out their work by traveling from one place to another. Their responsibility was especially to collect information from enemy states or border regions. According to Kautilya, there were four main types of them –

**1) Sattri Spy:** Sattri spies gained people's trust by disguising themselves as astrologers, sages, religious scholars, or prophets. The king appointed them near high officials such as ministers, generals, and treasurers. By gaining people's trust, they collected internal secret information.<sup>12</sup>

**2) Tikṣṇa Spy:** Tikṣṇas were brave and skilled in risky tasks. If necessary, they completed their work even at the cost of their lives. They were proficient in infiltrating enemy camps, undertaking expeditions in dangerous places, and uncovering secret conspiracies.<sup>13</sup>

**3) Rasada Spy:** Rasada spies were of a ruthless nature and suppressed enemies by using poison if necessary. They entered the houses of high officials in the disguise of cooks, servants, or attendants and collected secret information. Creating disorder within the enemy camp was also included in their duties.<sup>14</sup>

**4) Parivrājikā Spy:** Parivrājikās were female spies who entered the inner apartments in the disguise of nuns. Among them there were sub-categories such as *Bhikṣukī*, *Muṇḍā*, and *Vṛśālī*. They stayed in the houses of the royal family or ministers, collected information, and transmitted it through specific signals. The use of female spies was particularly effective in obtaining secret state information.<sup>15</sup>

### **Internal and External Spies:**

Kautilya further divided each category into two types –

- **Internal spies:** They stayed in the houses of ministers and officials in the form of servants, cooks, barbers, or attendants and reported the daily activities.
- **External spies:** They collected information in public places in the disguise of beggars, dancers, singers, actors, or disabled persons.

In this way Kautilya gave the spy system a multi-layered and well-organized form. In maintaining administrative purity, examining the attitude of the subjects, observing economic activities, and uncovering the strength and conspiracies of enemies – the role of spies was essential in every case. In the political thought of ancient India, this well-structured spy system is considered a unique example.

### **Recruitment and Appointment of Spies:**

In ancient Indian political thought, the recruitment of spies was a carefully planned and well-organized process. Acharya Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* provided detailed instructions regarding the recruitment, criteria, and appointment of spies. According to him, the king should appoint separate spies to keep watch over high officials such as ministers, priests, commanders, the crown prince, gatekeepers, internal guards, guards of military camps, the *Samāharta*, *Sannidhāta*, *Pradeṣṭā*, fort commanders, frontier guards, and forest officers.<sup>16</sup>

Kautilya fixed special criteria in selecting spies. They should be chosen considering their appearance, style of speech, knowledge of languages, intelligence, skill, and social position. Before appointment, their character, loyalty, patience, ability to maintain secrecy, and mental firmness should be tested. No one should be appointed as a spy without proper examination.

Kautilya also gave clear instructions regarding deployment. A *vijigīṣu* (victory-seeking) king should send spies to the courts of enemy, friendly, intermediate, and neutral states. Not only the king, but also the eighteen types of principal officers – such as ministers, priests, commanders, etc. – should be kept under surveillance by spies. It is also mentioned

that hunchbacks, dwarfs, eunuchs, mute persons, or artisan women should be sent in disguise to the internal areas of enemy and friendly kingdoms, because they did not easily arouse suspicion.<sup>17</sup>

Special caution was necessary in forts and border regions. It was advised to appoint persons of the merchant class inside forts, skilled ascetics or saints at the borders, farmers and impoverished persons within the kingdom, and shepherds in frontier areas as spies. In forest regions, clever forest-dwellers or hermits were to be appointed to learn about enemy activities.

Moreover, the king should appoint spies to learn about the likes and dislikes of city dwellers and subjects, as well as dissatisfaction or signs of possible rebellion. In this way the king could remain aware of the true state of public opinion and take necessary corrective measures.

Therefore, it becomes clear that Kautilya organized the recruitment and appointment of spies in a highly strategic manner. By directing the deployment of different spies according to place, person, and situation, he advised the formation of a wide and effective intelligence network. At the same time, he emphasized that proper testing and investigation of spies must be conducted before their deployment so that the security of the state and administrative purity remain intact.

### **Methods of Espionage:**

Acharya Kautilya clearly determined the rights, duties, and methods of operation of spies in his Arthashastra. According to him, spies were the main means of effective control within the machinery of the state. The methods of operation of spies are discussed below –

#### **1) Surveillance over Ministers and High Officials**

Kautilya said that before appointing an **amatya** or minister, they should be examined through four types of tests – **dharmopadha**, **arthopadha**, **kamopadha**, and **bhayopadha**. The practical application and observation of these tests were carried out through spies. Those persons who might join the enemy out of anger, greed, or wounded pride were to be kept under special surveillance. In the disguise of astrologers, ascetics, artists, singers, or maidservants, spies entered the houses of ministers and collected secret information. If necessary, information was exchanged through signals, secret writing, or special marks.

#### **2) Increasing the Treasury and Economic Control**

One of the responsibilities of spies was to enrich the state treasury. Vaidehaka spies, in the guise of merchants, observed markets, customs duties, frontier taxes, boat taxes, allowances, and commercial transactions. In some cases, strategies were used against irreligious or dishonest persons to collect revenue for the state. For example, wealth could be brought into the state treasury under the pretext of loans or pledges. However, Kautilya clearly stated that such strategies were applicable only against wicked persons.

#### **3) Testing the Financial Honesty of Royal Officials**

Spies investigated whether officials were misappropriating extra money beyond their government salaries. According to Kautilya, a person who spends more than his income is suspicious in honesty. Therefore, they were tested by assigning different responsibilities.

#### **4) Suppression of Traitors and Rebels**

Eliminating conspirators against the state was an important task of spies. Female spies, especially **Parivrājikā** or **Bhikṣukī**, entered the houses of traitors and collected necessary information. Sometimes rebellion was suppressed through the use of poison or by creating

confusion through strategy. Kautilya also mentioned strategies in which mutual suspicion was created among enemies, setting them against one another.

### **5) Observation of Public Opinion**

Spies collected information about the attitudes of the subjects, dissatisfaction, or the possibility of rebellion. It was determined who among the people supported the king and who opposed him, and necessary measures were taken accordingly. If necessary, dissatisfaction was pacified through money or divisions were created among opponents.

### **6) Monitoring the Activities of Departmental Heads and Administrative Chiefs**

Spies secretly observed the activities of the heads of various departments of the state. The objective was to maintain honesty and discipline at every level of the administration.

### **7) Creating Division within Associations**

If any association or group became powerful, divisions were created among them through Sattri spies. The aim of this strategy was to destroy their unity by provoking mutual jealousy, conflict, and suspicion.

### **Activities of Spies in Enemy States:**

According to Kautilya, the intelligence system was equally important not only for one's own state but also in relation to enemy states. In enemy states four categories of people were identified – (1) angry, (2) greedy, (3) fearful, and (4) proud. Dissatisfied persons of these categories were brought to one's own side through persuasion, grants, or promises. Spies appointed in enemy states established contact with local opposition groups and secured their support.

### **Double-Salaried Spies:**

Some spies received salary from both their own state and the enemy state. Through them, internal information of the enemy could easily be obtained. However, to prevent the possibility of betrayal, it was advised that their families be kept in their own state with honor.<sup>18</sup>

### **Poison Maidens:**

Kautilya mentioned the use of poison maidens in special circumstances. Through beauty and attraction, the enemy was enticed and later killed by administering poison.

Spies were the 'eyes' and 'ears' of the king. In maintaining administrative purity, enriching the treasury, suppressing rebellion, examining public opinion, and expanding influence in enemy states—their role was indispensable in every field. The spy system designed by Kautilya was organized, institutional, and based on systematic methods. He emphasized verification of information, comparing the reports of multiple spies, and strict rules of secrecy. Therefore, it can be said that in ancient Indian political thought the spy system was the center of administration, through which governance, loyalty, and state security were ensured.

### **Punishment of Offenders and System of Verification of Information:**

Kautilya in his Arthashastra instructed the adoption of a very cautious policy regarding spies and informants. According to him, a king cannot make decisions based solely on the statement of a single informant. The same information should be confirmed by at least three separate informants; only then will it be considered acceptable.<sup>19</sup> Through this method it becomes possible to protect the king from false information, propaganda, or accusations motivated by personal hostility.

In Kautilya's view, if any informant repeatedly provides false or misleading information, he should be secretly punished or removed from his position. This is because incorrect or misleading information may cause serious damage to the security of the state, the stability of administration, and the welfare of the subjects.

In this context, Kautilya described a dynamic and test-based intelligence system. The activities of spies were also verified through other spies. In other words, within the intelligence system itself there existed a mechanism of control and balance.

Therefore, according to Kautilya, good governance of the state largely depends on the collection of information, verification of facts, and proper punishment of offenders. Decision-making on the basis of correct information alone can ensure the justice of the king and the stability of the state.

### **The Intelligence System of Modern India: Structural Arrangement, Operational Process and Strategic Significance:**

In the discussion of political science, national security is one of the fundamental elements for protecting the existence, sovereignty, and strategic interests of a state. In the contemporary international system, the importance of intelligence structures has increased manifold in the context of terrorism, interstate conflicts, cyber threats, economic espionage, and information warfare. After independence, India gradually developed its security framework into an institutional and technology-driven form. The present intelligence system of India is a multi-layered, integrated, and strategic structure that plays an effective role in both internal and external security.

#### **1. Internal Intelligence Structure**

The central pillar of India's internal security system is the **Intelligence Bureau (IB)**. It operates under the Ministry of Home Affairs and is responsible for collecting and analyzing intelligence related to internal security of the country. The agency provides the government with advance warnings regarding terrorism, separatism, communal instability, extremism, and the possible infiltration of foreign intelligence agencies. It is notable that the IB is not directly a law-enforcement agency; rather, it functions as an analytical and advisory institution.

On the other hand, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) is a national-level counter-terrorism investigative agency, which was established in 2009. This agency exercises special powers in investigating terrorism-related crimes, transnational militant networks, financing, and hawala transactions. On the instruction of the central government, it can take over investigations in any state, thereby ensuring a centralized structure for safeguarding national security.

In the field of economic security, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) plays an important role. By preventing smuggling, customs evasion, international trafficking, and illegal trade, it contributes to maintaining the economic stability of the country.

#### **2. Technology-Based Intelligence System**

In the digital age, the transformation of security challenges has made intelligence systems technology-dependent. The National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) is a specialized agency in this context, which provides strategic intelligence support through satellite surveillance, signal intelligence (SIGINT), cyber security, and electronic information analysis. Through modern technology, data analytics, and cyber monitoring systems, NTRO has strengthened the national security framework.

### **3. Military Intelligence Structure**

In the military field, intelligence information is coordinated by the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), which was established in 2002. It collects and analyzes information gathered by the army, navy, and air force and provides assistance in defense planning. The DIA plays an important role in assessing border situations, foreign military preparations, and strategic evaluations.

As the intelligence branch of the Indian Army, the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) monitors military activities in border areas, prevents infiltration, and provides strategic assistance during wartime.

### **4. External Intelligence Structure**

India's principal foreign intelligence agency is the **Research and Analysis Wing (RAW or R&AW)**, which was established in 1968. It operates directly under the Prime Minister's Office. The primary responsibilities of this agency include analyzing the political, military, and economic situations of foreign states, monitoring cross-border terrorism, and informing the government about the international strategic environment. The role of RAW is highly significant in the formulation of foreign policy and defense planning.

### **5. Coordination and Strategic Characteristics**

A fundamental feature of modern India's intelligence system is inter-agency coordination. Under the leadership of the National Security Adviser, various agencies exchange information and cooperate strategically to create an integrated security framework. Artificial intelligence, big data analytics, drone surveillance, and international intelligence cooperation have made the present system more dynamic.

### **Conclusion:**

During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, the Mauryan emperor, the spy system was an important component of state administration. In the book *Arthashastra*, written by his chief adviser Kautilya (Chanakya), a detailed description of the spy system is found. When compared with the present Indian intelligence structure, it is seen that many elements of the ancient principles are still relevant today.

During Chandragupta's time, spies were divided into different categories—ascetics, merchants, householders, and even in the disguise of beggars they collected information. Their main objective was to gather advance information about administrative corruption, possible rebellions, or the conspiracies of enemies. This system played a very effective role in maintaining internal discipline and observing the activities of the enemy side.

In present-day India, there are separate intelligence agencies for internal and external security—such as the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). Information is collected and analyzed through modern technology, cyber surveillance, satellite imaging, etc. However, the fundamental principle remains unchanged—collecting advance information and its proper analysis to ensure the security of the state.

In the Mauryan era, spies mainly gathered information through human relations, psychological strategies, and disguises; at present, technology-based intelligence activities have gained greater importance. Nevertheless, the three principles—“multiple sources of information,” “secrecy,” and “central coordination”—exist equally in both ancient and

modern systems. The emphasis on caution, analytical approach, and preventive strategies in Kautilya's principles is also consistent with modern intelligence philosophy.

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