

Kautilya and the Idea of Welfare State

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ABSTRACT

The term 'welfare' can be understood as a state or condition of well being, good fortune, happiness or prosperity of an individual in a community. Welfare in the life of the state indicates a guarantee of collective social care of its citizens. In the modern neo-liberal environment of recent years, the concept of welfare state is losing ground where the idea of state withdrawing from the service sector becomes more and more favourable. However, a rethinking of the trend is necessary so far as developing countries with scarce resources are concerned.

Against this backdrop the focus of this paper is on the concept of welfare state in India in the ancient period. I have specifically taken Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' to bring forth the concept of welfare state as it was prevalent in those days. In the process, I intend to highlight how such a state would be quite suitable in a country like India where the resources are scarce.

Keywords: Welfare, State, Kautilya, India, Arthashastra

Introduction:

The term 'welfare' can be understood as a state or condition of well being, good fortune, happiness or prosperity of an individual in a community. Welfare in the life of the state indicates a guarantee of collective social care of its citizens. In the modern neo-liberal environment of recent years, the concept of welfare state is losing ground where the idea of state withdrawing from the service sector becomes more and more favourable.

It is a commonly held notion that the concept of welfare state originated in the west. According to Bo Sodersten, the welfare state came into existence after the first great burst of globalisation in the period between 1820-1914. It is basically a construction of the 20th century, and the states of Western Europe are among these countries that have been pioneers in developing welfare agreements encompassing the great majority of their populations (Sodersten, 2004:2). However, a close perusal of ancient Indian texts on polity and society reveals that the idea of state sponsored welfare, though of recent origin in the Occident, was not unknown in ancient India.

Idea of Welfare in Kautilyan State:

Quite unlike the modern welfare state, which developed as a response to the industrial development and post-first world war situation in the west and in the post colonial situation in India, the Kautilyan concept of 'Yogakshema'-welfare of citizens- did not evolve as a consequence of any revolution or war. On the contrary, the idea was predominantly guided by

the practical concerns of good governance. The state as part of good governance, played an effective role over individual's social, political, economic, cultural, moral and even spiritual life which led to the development of the concept of life as an integrated whole, not an amalgam of self contained fragments (Shamasastri, 1960: 156-57). The individual in today's state is self contained, self-centred and self-defining subject whose entity consists in the protection and promotion of his own interests. Justice in this state implies distribution of benefits in an equitable ways and is intended to be proportionate to unequal needs.

Kautilya's concept in its scope was a holistic one in which the social responsibility of welfare was not only for the individual or the society but for the whole of humanity, nature and cosmos. The social responsibility of welfare in the modern state does not go beyond ensuring the basic human needs to everyone in society, beyond which the individual is free to compete for higher rewards. Thus, the exercise of human potentialities and the realisation of human capacities become dependent upon individual attempts. Consequently, this has given birth to consumerist, acquisitive and possessive individuals interested in development of neither self nor society.

In the ancient scheme of thought human welfare was to be ensured through an organised form, be it the society or the state. State activities were not be confined to the maintenance of law and order and protection of territory only, but extended to the preservation, protection and promotion of social order. The Kautilyan state was to make optimum use of all possible resources for the benefits of the state and its citizens. The ruler was both the master and the servant of his people. He, as master, had to protect the people by virtue of law; as servant, he served the people by following his '*svadharmā*' or duties of protecting the life, property and territory of his people and kingdom. The implication is that the ruler should seek his happiness and welfare in that of his subjects. He was in authority for the sake of maintenance of law and order. However, enjoyment of power and privileges were not primary; on the contrary, what was more important was to discharge duties and responsibility. The ultimate accountability and responsibility of a person 'in authority' was in respect of the universal good, the *Yogakshema*. According to K.V. Rangaswami Aiyengar, the promotion of public welfare was the justification for the royal office (Aiyengar,1934:66).

The personal character of the ruler was the imperative for virtuous administration which would lead towards welfare. Kautilya sought a centralised government by experts because the dispensation of welfare was one of the chief duties of the administration. Its efficacy was dependent upon the competence and ability of the bureaucrat on one hand, and the honesty, integrity and loyalty of the same, on the other. The administrator was accountable to both the king as well as the citizens and was punished for any misconduct or maladministration.

The state in modern times has assumed a central place in society unparalleled by any other institution. This centrality of the state in general, and its administrative apparatus in particular, has not only become an obstacle to human welfare but also an instrument of exploitation. In modern period state organisations have become end in them and possess their own distinctive needs which require fulfilment- a sizeable part of the state resources is used

up in feeding these institutions. In our state today the people's representatives as well as civil servants have failed on both counts. On one hand, they have failed to provide good governance; on the other hand, they have failed as instruments of social progress by optimising economic and human development (Gupta, 1996:88-89). Hence, unlike the Kautilyan state, its modern counterpart has been unable to remove or overcome the major hindrance- paucity of resources-for furtherance of its welfare projects.

Kautilya in his scheme of welfare activities emphasised the role of society more than that of the state. To him society and state was not coterminous rather the state was a part of society. The society was sovereign while the state was the servant. It was the responsibility of the state to maintain and protect the weak, the handicapped, the orphan, the aged, the destitute and the deprived sections of the society. Civic facilities were extended and maintained by the state. Furthermore, protection from natural calamities and post disaster rehabilitation was a preserve of the state. The state, however, was neither autocratic nor omnipotent- it actually sought the cooperation of the people and the civil society at every stage, even though it itself felt concerned about each and every aspect of people's life. Hence, voluntary treatment was not given to the state alone- society was to be more involved in welfare activities and state was to come forward only when society was unable or unwilling to alleviate distress. The state was supposed to act mainly as a coordinator and extend its help only when necessary. This is so, as to Kautilya, the areas of welfare were mainly social and civic in nature, so its implementation should ideally be at the societal level. In this way Kautilya sought to keep state intervention in welfare activities within manageable proportions. Hence, unlike its modern counterpart, the Kautilyan state was not exposed to a growing burden of obligations and responsibilities which become difficult to fulfil.

The pressure upon the state of dispensing welfare was further lessened by considering the family as the basic unit of welfare. It was considered to be the most suitable for taking physical and emotional care of its sick, old and infirm. Welfare and care produced within the family was not sold, but provided free, and thus, was not measurable in terms of money. This institution had a moral responsibility to look after the welfare of its members and any lapse could be punished by the state. Today's self-centred nuclear family is no longer equipped to discharge welfare functions which have to be purchased. On the other hand, state as an impersonal organisation cannot hope to compete with the family in terms of love, care, sacrifice or personal attention. Hence, an individual cannot experience the full benefits of welfare by dependence on the state alone.

For Kautilyan state the dispensation of justice was much more selective than we find today. In ancient days welfare was given to the deserving citizens like the aged, sick, disabled, orphans, homeless, single parents and not universalise the benefits. Even in good economic conditions the state resources were to be used for the most needy, and hence, to achieve the maximum welfare of society, the policy of selectivity was thought to be more practical. The basic assumption was that the affluent and the upper classes possessed resources to provide for their own welfare and the state need not allocate its scarce resources for the purpose.

We find that in the Kautilyan state duties had precedence over rights. Working towards the well being of the people was the concurrent duty of the individual, society and state. Observance of 'Svadharma' one's own duty was the pillar of socio-political life and everyone from king to the humblest person had to observe one's *Svadharma*. Kautilya was of the opinion that if every person performed his duties properly and well then there will be real welfare and civilisation will inevitably attain a higher stage. Furthermore Kautilya also held that observance of proper balance between privileges and duties alone could lead to social harmony. Rather than making incessant demand for more and more rights, people could enjoy them within a limit without forgetting their duties. Only then the living conditions of the people could be improved and a high level of moral consciousness could be attained.

The economy of the Kautilyan state was also centred round the concept of *Yogakshema*. He realised that the tendency of the privileged section in society was to exploit the underprivileged; hence, state intervention was necessary on behalf of the latter. Regulation of economy without control of ownership by the state was the requirement of the day. Private sector was freely permitted to promote production but was prevented from becoming monopolistic and had to follow the state norms in terms of labour-laws and security, suitable work conditions and other related issues. Kautilya was aware unregulated price mechanism could affect different classes of people, especially the underprivileged. Hence, he tried to strike a balance between maximisation of profit as a basic goal of society on one hand, and providing for the needs of the lowest in society, on the other.

Moreover, Kautilya's economic scheme, as part of the welfare project, emphasised self employment over state-employment. In his opinion, indiscriminate state employment resulted in an over-burden over the state exchequer, led to high taxation, corruption etc and generated habitual dependence upon state help. It, on its part, made people lazy and they gradually lost the initiative to work. To avoid this problem, Kautilya had stressed self help and self employment. On the other hand, state employment was extended to those in real need and not capable of self employment. It was the duty of the state to build confidence among the people and create conditions and atmosphere conducive to self-employment. To Kautilya, the freedom of the individual was commensurate with the area of self-employment- the more scope for self-help. In Kautilya's period, state was the largest employer of unskilled labour while the skilled craftsmen and those belonging to higher and middle classes were mostly self-employed.

To Kautilya, there was no antagonism between individual freedom and state authority. The state, by not only guaranteeing certain freedoms but ensuring their employment and protection, actually promoted welfare for the individual as well as society. Nevertheless, in conformity with the social ethos of the time, no individual freedom could compromise social good. As the latter was always more important, so, all freedoms and privileges were in conformity to the objective of social good. Furthermore, the Kautilyan state was not merely concerned with the material and physical welfare of the people; moral welfare was the ultimate objective. The state aimed for perfection, freedom, prosperity and self-realisation of the individual. That would lead to an all-round development-material as well as spiritual- of

both individual and society. Material prosperity was not to be appropriated by a few, but to be distributed justly and equitably among all in society. The state was expected to ensure material provisions but it was regarded as a moral institution. Kautilya attempted a moralisation of individual ends through the benevolent agency of the state. The aim of the state was to create conditions and environment that enabled people in the society to live in peace, harmony and happiness (Kohli, 1995: 121-22).

The Kautilyan model fulfils the basic criteria of a modern liberal state with its totalitarian implications shorn-off. It is not suggested that all of Kautilya's prescriptions are valid for the modern times; but as the Arthashastra is a comprehensive treatise on political, social, economic and administrative dimensions an in-depth study of his concept of *Yogakshema* with an open mind may give some inspiration and guidance. Prof. M.M. Sankhdher said in a discussion on the subject held on 12th March, 1994 that, "Indian planners, economists and policy makers who have worked more than four decades on the Nehruvian model can, at least for experimenting, search the Kautilyan model of a welfare state. It would be easier for India to benefit from its past rich contribution to political and social engineering. Even the western societies, in order to get out of the prevailing crises, may like to conform to the vital principles of family integration, selective social security, preference to voluntary and private bodies over state sponsored welfare and provision of justice with liberty"(Sankhdher, 1995: 129-30).

Concluding Remarks:

Thus Kautilya's Arthashastra can be re-examined from the angle of global human concerns for a better society- harmonious, stable and prosperous blended with moral and spiritual awareness. The basic foundation of the state should be grounded on the canons of liberty and all forms of regimentation, indoctrination, thought-control, authoritarianism or totalitarianism should be done away with. The state should become more sensitive to popular aspirations and more democratic in the discharge of its functions. The policies of the state should be oriented towards encouraging a person towards self-help and growth of his unique personality. The state should neither dissociate itself completely from the welfare project nor pursue cradle-to-grave model of welfare as both are detrimental to the development of the individual. As long as the state retains its pre-eminent position, welfare must remain as one of its primary functions. A welfare state, operating under social control, will be more suitable in today's world and in this sense lies the relevance of the concept of welfare in Kautilya's state.

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