

## A Brief Comparison on 'Espionage' and the Importance of 'Spies' between Kautilya's *The Arthashastra* & Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*

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### Abstract

*The Arthashastra and The Art of War are by far one of the finest political and war discourses ever written in prose form. Both dating back to 4th and 6th century B.C. respectively have tremendous far-sighted psychoanalytical elements embedded in them. Kautilya, is often referred to as the modern-day economist and Sun Tzu a war strategist in their times. Having belonged to one of the oldest Indian and Chinese civilizations respectively, they have spelt out clear principles for espionage and stressed the importance of spies. Often compared to Machiavelli's The Prince, Aristotle's Politics they contain in them a detailed account of first-hand human experiences. The paper focuses on the espionage discourse, which is filled with courage, dedication and commitment. And is also equally watered down with anxiety, depression and unparalleled justice toward a greater cause. Kautilya is seen a realist in his approach and the discourse contains animal analogies. On the contrary, Sun Tzu is seen a naturalist and attaches nature to his discourse.*

**Keywords:** Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Espionage, Spies, War.

### 1. Introduction

Kautilya (370 – 283 B.C.) and Sun Tzu (544 - 496 B.C.) are perhaps by and large considered ruthless in their teaching and writings. Their primary focus always center toward achieving many objectives and in this very case on espionage strategy and the importance of spies. Interestingly, *The Arthashastra's* Book 1, Chapter 13 and *The Art of War's* Chapter 13 exclusively deal with the use of spies.

Both the writers have significant pull over convictions than preferences in their objective writings. This helps the reader realize that preferences are negotiable and convictions are not. And under sheer pressure, preferences tend to become weak and convictions gathers significant strength. Most often, they talk on exact opposites. The rewards could be followed with punishments, morality to be encapsulated with immorality and honesty accompanied by dishonesty. And human actions are justified with rational a chance that is presented to them and not in the form of choices.

These aspects are ruthless in their nature. Kautilya and Sun Tzu have established clear military principles that their respective treatise is for strategic and tactical gains and hence important values such as morality and honesty do not gain prominence.

*"He suggests using spies and operatives who are either religious leaders or disguised as such or part of such institutions that most closely match the beliefs and habits of these discontent citizens".*

- (Singh, [www.bloggingthearthashastra.blogspot.in](http://www.bloggingthearthashastra.blogspot.in)).

### 2. Objective of the Study

The war and espionage strategy is extensively dealt not only in literal terms but in principle is figurative about managing conflicts and winning battles. And Kautilya and Sun Tzu have in many ways realized the importance of spies in a war scenario. It completely minimizes the human casualties and on economic fronts it clearly remarks sustainable

management of resources. The focal point of contention is heavily rested upon many facets of human action and behavior. And it becomes imminent to decode those actions involving human emotions and therefore deeper introspection of these aspects is being analyzed in the article.

### 3. Methodology

In the paper, I seek to pick few quotes and human attributes like emotions and actions from their works respectively and analyze them. The methodology undertaken is to analyze and compare the mindsets of both Kautilya and Sun Tzu with special reference to 'espionage' and 'spies'. 'Espionage' as an activity involves collective effort of the people involved in them. Whereas 'Spies' are a set of people who are involved in the activity and operate individually. Also, the culmination of these two works significantly portraying on values and habits are hand picked, compared and analyzed. For instance, in the world of espionage Kautilya deals quite extensively on 'anger', 'greed', 'fear', 'affection' and 'flattery'. Whereas, in case of Sun Tzu, he gives impetus to human actions such as 'patience', 'subversion' and 'chaos'.

### 4. Realism Vs Naturalism

Kautilya, Chief Minister to the Mauryan Emperor Chandragupta Maurya is perhaps considered one of the first realists in the world of political discourses. He attributes a whole plethora of human activities through the use of animal analogies. In modern parlance we could attribute it to a psychoanalytical term called "mind games".

"Anger" (Rangarajan, 114).

Here, Kautilya stresses on the emotion of 'anger'. Kautilya refers to this aspect as 'Vice'. This in reference denotes the role of spies who belong to the enemy state. He argues that in order to win an enemy, one needs to convince him that his/her ruler is like a snake and will bite in their pathways. This therefore would enable the enemy to disown his native state and defect to the other.

"Demonstrating Omniscience" (Rangarajan, 689)

In the above phrase, psychological warfare is given absolute prominence, to which Kautilya attaches utmost importance, he stresses on the aspect of "demonstrating omniscience". To Kautilya, the king's subjects in his court should be made aware that the king is omniscient. To this effect, he adds that this would project that the king is being well informed. When in reality, it is the role of spies to bring forth information on king's subjects and important facts from foreign lands. We find when king is showcased in the limelight; the spies do the homework in the background.

Sun Tzu on the contrary is a naturalist. A military General to King Ho Lu of the Wu Clan, is perhaps one of the finest military strategists. His ultimate emphasis is upon foreknowledge to any given situation in order to succeed in a war scenario.

The real strategy devised is a psychological war. In modern parlance, we refer to "proxy wars". The idea is to subdue the enemy that a war is in progress; but in stark reality the enemy is deceived into the trap. The mind-set of the enemy is thus tricked.

*"Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt"*  
([www.artofwarsuntzu.com](http://www.artofwarsuntzu.com), 15)

He attaches importance to the use of secrecy in battle movement through natural analogies. He refers to secrecy and often it is a metaphor assigned to darkness. And the battle movement is compared to swiftness like a thunderbolt. In modern parlance, The Shaolin School of Martial Arts, China clearly spells out eleven principles to master the art of self-defense. And among the principles laid out, one of them attaches importance to the metaphor of 'thunderbolt'.

*"Knowledge of enemy's disposition can be obtained from other men"* ([www.artofwarsuntzu.com](http://www.artofwarsuntzu.com), 33)

Here he stresses the importance of foreknowledge for a warrior to succeed in a war. Ultimately, human intelligence is very carefully constructed through extensive planning. Sun Tzu argues that foreknowledge cannot be elicited from spirits, cannot be obtained inductively from experience, or by any deductive calculation.

Sun Tzu clarifies that chaos is good. In common reality, chaos could be seen as a gaping pit. But, he pitches in that chaos is like a ladder. One needs to climb on it to outwit the given confused state of situation. This, in his approach is the single most important aspect to subdue the enemy. Intelligence by far, can be collated only through human endeavors. And to minimize the casualties and thereby forbid a war altogether, spying become the focal point of the nerve center of war strategy.

## 5. The Game of Chess Vs the Game of Go (Encircling Game)

Unlike the game of chess, which is traditionally a fight wherein, the king is cornered by either checkmate or stalemate; the game of go is about occupying more space. War strategists and experts have long debated the extent of employing strategies in a war scenario to capture a territory or regain a lost one.

In the modern day scenario, we could take the example of the instances during the Vietnam War. The General of the US Army chose the chess strategy and the Vietnam General who chose the GO game strategy. Eventually, the American people were also protesting against the war in their home state. These instances not only led the US to evade their war but also ultimately led to their withdrawal. This was necessarily a psychological pressure for the US administration to which they could not bolster.

Kautilya's treatise deals with the art of out winning the enemy without even entering the fort. Luring the enemy out of the fort is the trick to which he lays his significance. The game of chess, though tries to corner the king, refers to him directly as an object of defeat in order to win it. But in the game Go, the pawns move across the board in order to occupy more space and therefore, not only the king, but his subjects, courtiers, citizens are all cornered psychologically. The encirclement reflects the mental challenges posed to the given circumstance.

Sun Tzu is an expert tactician in the art of subversion. He employs small strategies to confuse the enemy. He proposes to attack the small pickets of army posts of the enemy and when the real army arrives to rescue the victimized army post, the small army sent is gone by then to attack the next post. In this daring strategy of subversion, the enemy is led to believe one but deceived to cater to the other. Thus, Sun Tzu scatters the small army of soldiers to out win the mind of the enemy combatants and thereby leaving them with a deep sense of frustration.

## 6. Classification of Spies

Kautilya strongly believes in propaganda to be not only used for political discourses but chiefly also to employ and recruit spies for the kingdom. He preaches thus:

*"Soothsayers, readers of omens, astrologers, reciters of Puranas, intuitionists, clandestine agents, those who helped the king perform the tricks and those who had witnessed them shall advertise them inside his own territory". (Rangarajan, 689).*

The chief duty of these various people could be utilized for the spread of propaganda. To add color to the palate of propaganda, Kautilya employs "Demonstrating association with Gods"<sup>1</sup> tactic to have led the local communities to believe something good or bad has happened. This crucial aspect according to Kautilya becomes the root cause for high propaganda.

*"The conqueror shall make gullible people believe that he is in direct contact with Gods by various tricks." (Rangarajan, 689)*

Natural disasters, passage of comets or asteroids in the sky are attributed to bad and good situations respectively. The analogy is directed toward people through the assigned artisans by the King. And once when a foreign land is conquered, the same technique could be employed to win the support of his new citizens. Super natural situations and black magic tricks are given huge impetus in this regard and carry significant weightage.

Kautilya has specially created a hierarchy for covert agents to be placed in the organizational structure of the kingdom. In today's world we call it the secret services. He has created a chart right from the "Gudapurusha"<sup>2</sup> (the chief of intelligence services) to the common householder to be included in the secret services of the state.

*"Miraculous results can be achieved by practicing the methods of subversion" (Rangarajan, 462)*

Kautilya gives a special mention to the use of 'Double Agents'. In modern parlance we attribute it to 'Operation Double Cross' successfully employed by the British during the Second World War. Wherein, Spy agents from Russia and Germany were caught by the British and in-turn were overturned to spy on their native states.

Sun Tzu classifies spies into 5 categories:

<sup>1</sup> A tactic or strategy created by Kautilya for the purposes of appealing directly to the common people. (Rangarajan, 689).

<sup>2</sup> Clandestine Agent who directly reports to the King. (Rangarajan, 464).

"i). Local Spies; ii) inward spies; iii) converted spies; iv) doomed spies; v) surviving spies."  
([www.artofwarsuntzu.com](http://www.artofwarsuntzu.com), 33)

He claims that when these five kinds of spies are all at work, none can discover the secret system.

For inward spies, Tzu argues that the inhabitants of the enemy district should be treated kindly in order to win over people and utilize their spy services. Like Kautilya, Tzu also emphasizes on the importance of converted spies. It is imperative for the state to get hold of enemy's spies and use them for state's purposes.

"Surviving spies, finally, are those who bring news from the enemy's camp". ([www.artofwarsuntzu.com](http://www.artofwarsuntzu.com), 34)

Among the citizens of the enemy camp, there could be some discounted with their native state's rule and they could be carefully approached and turned in order to bring news from the enemy's encampment. These spies should be dealt with extreme caution and patience. Patience more as an individual character trait is having been looked at like a habit to be cultivated. This makes a clear distinction between habit and behavior.

"Spies cannot be usefully employed without a certain intuitive sagacity" ([www.artofwarsuntzu.com](http://www.artofwarsuntzu.com), 34)

Tzu argues that it is highly important for spies to develop mental strength than physical strength. This in turn, would make them wise and enable them to make shrewd and concrete choices. Spies have limited time and scope throughout their ordeals almost every day. And their choices do not necessarily clout with any given rationale but go by purely circumstantial chances.

"The end aim of spying in all its five varieties is knowledge of the enemy; and this knowledge can only be derived, in the first instance, from the converted spy" ([www.artofwarsuntzu.com](http://www.artofwarsuntzu.com), 34)

The ultimate aim of the converted spy is to satisfy the needs of both his native state and the enemy state. This involves tremendous pressure and duress on the part of the converted spy and his every move his double-watched in double time.

## 7. Conclusion

Around 321BC, the illustrated work of Kautilya appeared. And roughly about 2000 years later, the principles laid out by Kautilya astonishingly sounds relevant today. The first translations to English from Sanskrit were compiled and published by R Shamasastri in 1915. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, the ancient Chinese treatise written about 2500 years ago is arguably the most important work on the subject of strategy. Lionel Giles first translated it in English in 1910. Since then it has been taught in many war and strategy colleges through the world.

The chapters dealing with the espionage strategy and the use of spies concerning human behavior are heavily debated on the lines of human excellence. Kautilya clearly makes a distinction between achieving objectives and foregoing human values directed toward a larger cause. Toward achieving larger causes, Kautilya chooses consistently to establish a parallel consensus between the minds of the individual and achieving objective. And the role of the spies are heavily relied upon to negate wars and to avoid the casualties. However ruthless in his ideology, he is considered to be a true *realpolitik*. The human mind is thoroughly utilized out of fear, anger or greed.

Tzu attributes the importance of spies to one of the elements of earth, 'water'. And on them depends an army's ability to move. To avoid wars, one needs to rely on the works of the spies. Strategies that are created between strength and weakness are given a major impetus. Tzu heavily depends on deceiving the mind of the enemy in order to win a battle without even to having fighting in one. His emphasis on mental strength over physical is to be clearly established in the most befitting fashion of modern-day espionage. Subversion and Chaos have become the epitome his successful devised strategies among many.

Kautilya and Tzu have laid out clear principles for the purposes for human survival in the harshest conditions possible. But when clarified in closer perspectives, they have created some of them. One priority they have surmised is to denote the extensive roles of surviving and converted spies. They can be appointed for special occasions. Weddings, Throne Ascensions and major festivals according to them could be utilized as occasions for the purposes of insertion or defection of spies. This in modern day parlance could be perhaps referred to as the clandestine operations; assassinations could be referred to as the black operations. These characteristics and strategies involve deep human intellect and require consistent patience to have them established. The discourse depicts accurate endeavor of human conditions and reiterates the importance of survival.

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