
Espionage System in Ancient India

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Abstract : In the history of political thinking and state-craft in ancient India, espionage occupied a very important place. The earliest mention of spying can be found in the Rig Veda. The word 'spasa' is the oldest name for the spies referred to in the Rig Veda. Our Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and some of the Puranas presented a remarkable form of well-devised and well-established political thoughts along with proper references to the art of spying. It is interesting to note that the epithet 'caracaksu' which is so common in later literature and works on polity was used for a king for the first time in the Ramayana.

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In the history of political thinking and state-craft in ancient India, spying enthralled a veritably important place. The foremost citation of espionage can be set up in the Rig Veda. The word 'spasa' is the oldest name for the intelligencers appertained to in the Rig Veda.

Our Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and some of the Puranas presented a remarkable form of well-

cooked and well-established political studies along with proper references to the art of espionage. It's intriguing to note that the epithet 'caracaksu' which is so common in after literature and works on polity was used for a king for the first time in the Ramayana.

A king's dependence on the intelligencers has been expressed in an emotional manner with this veritably word 'caracaksu'. latterly authors on polity like Kamandaki and Somadeva and muses like Bharavi and Magha have used the term constantly.

The textbooks on Arthasastra, Dharmasastra and Nitisastra haven't only mentioned the art of espionage, but also have established it as an important political institution. Espionage is described as an necessary department of executive system in these textbooks.

Our ancient authors have mentioned the necessity of spying in the affairs of home administration as well as in foreign policy. Home administration in ancient Indian polity was called 'tantra', and foreign policy was nominated 'avapa'. Our authors have shown the mileage of espionage in both tantra and avapa.

Megasthenes who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya has described the intelligencers as overseers to whom was assigned the duty of watching all that went

on and making reports intimately to the king. According to Megasthenes, who was a veritably careful bystander of contemporary data and events, these intelligencers were multitudinous enough to be considered a special class in the society.

The elevation of the institution of espionage in ancient Indian politics may be well understood from the treatment of the subject by Kautilya. Kautilya's Arthashastra is really the topmost work of all the textbooks on polity in ancient India. In as numerous as 50 chapters out of the aggregate of 150 chapters of the Arthashastra, Kautilya has appertained to espionage. Of these 50 chapters again he has devoted 9 full chapters on observing only.

Among the post – Kautilya authors, Kamandaki(500A.D) and Somadeva(900A.D), who were hot followers of Kautilya, have devoted a full chapter on observing in their separate workshop- ‘ Kamandakiya- nitisara ’ and ‘ Nitivakyamrtam ’.

The significance of the institution of espionage can be realized from the colorful words used to denote a asset in our ancient textbooks. We've atleast 12 words for asset, similar as –

i) yatharhavarna, ii) pranidhi, iii) apasarpa, iv) cara, v) guptacara, vi) spasa, vii) gudhapurusa, viii) pratiskasa, ix) guptagati, x) mantragudha, xi) hitaprani, xii) yogapurusa etc.

The remarkable aspect of this institution is that, no other department of a state government excepting that of the spies had so many classification and gradation for its employees.

Classification of the Spies: The Arthashastra

The importance laid on the institution of spying in ancient India can be assessed from its manifold classification and innumerable varieties, described by our authors. Kautilya for instance, has described nine prominent classes and more than one hundred sub-classes of the spies. He however have divided the spies into two broad classes-

1. Samstha
2. Sancara

Samastha classes of spies : Those spies who worked from a particular place are called samastha classes of spies. These classes of spies are mainly responsible for maintaining law and order in the home state by ascertaining the purity or impurity of character of the king's servants. The samasthas have again been divided into five classes-

a) Kapatika : The word ‘kapatika’ is derived from ‘kapata’, deceit. A kapatika or fraudulent disciple is a skillful person capable of guessing the mind of others and reported to the king and the mantra to whom they were responsible, whatever evil they noticed in any persons. They were rewarded with honor and monetary grants.

b) Udasthita: An udasthita or recluse person is one who is initiated in asceticism and possessed of foresight and pure in character. Basically they were degraded ascetics, but were still endowed with intelligence and honesty. Equipped with plenty of money and assistance, they should get work done in a place assigned to them for the practice of some occupation. From the profits of work the king should provide all wondering monks with food, clothing and residence.

c) Grhapatika: Grhapatika or a house holder is a cultivator, fallen from his profession but possessed of foresight and pure character. This spy shall carry on the cultivation of land allotted to him for the purpose. Out of the profits he shall maintain other cultivators for spying under him and provide them with subsistence and lodging.

d) Vaidehaka: Vaidehaka or a ordinary trader spy is one who has fallen from his profession of treading, but possessed of foresight and pure character and acts under the guise of a merchant. This spy shall carry on the manufacture of merchandise on the lands allotted to him for the purpose. Out of the profits he shall maintain other traders providing them with subsistence and lodging. He then shall persuade those traders to collect news for the king.

e) Tapasa: Tapasa is a spy under the guise of an ascetic. They were the hermits with a shaven head or with matted hair, practicing austerities. They lived in suburbs of a city in association with a host of disciples with a shaven head or braided hair, lived on a handful of vegetables or meadow grass, taken once the interval of a month or two and to foretell future events. Thus a tapasa is a bogus ascetic who impresses upon the gullible that he is great seer and thus becomes the centre of intelligence work.

These five classes of members of secret service thus come from practically all walks of life and thus can keep watch over various sections of people.

Sancara classes of spies : Sancara spies are those who wander from place to place to perform their duty. They were required to keep a strict surveillance on the top officials. The spies belonging to the

sancara class are again divided into four classes-

(a) Satri: Satri or class mate spies are to be recruited from those orphans who are to be necessarily fed by the state and are put to study science, palmistry, sorcery, the duties of the various orders of religious life and the reading of omens and augury.

(b) Tikсна: Tikснаs or fiery spies are to be recruited from those brave men of the country who, reckless of their own life, confront elephants or tigers in fight mainly for the purpose of earning money.

(c) Rasada: Rasada or poisoner spies are to be recruited from those who have no trace of filial affection left in them and who are very cruel and indolent.

(d) Bhiksuki: A bhiksuki or a women ascetic is a poor widow of brahmana caste, very clever and desirous of earning her livelihood. They can also act in the guise of women with shaved head- munda.

Ubhaya vetana : In Indian system of spying another class of spies occupied an important and prominent place, they were called ubhaya vetana. Ubhaya vetana means they were recipients of salaries from two states. They were engaged by the vijigisu king and sent to a foreign state where they used to be employed again under that foreign king. These ubhaya vetana spies formed a class by themselves with their distinction they belonged neither to the samstha nor the sancara classes of spies. In modern system they are called the double agents.

However, there is no limit to covers which the spies could assume and the disguises taken by them depended on situational requirements.

Manu has presented all the necessary and essential points on Rajadharma in the 7th and 9th chapter of his smriti textbook. Manu smriti although contains no nonstop deliberation on the institution of espionage, yet the commentary he made on the mileage of espionage and the mode of working of the intelligencers, earn close attention and deep consideration. Manu has easily declared that fellowship or hostility with a foreign state depends entirely on the minister. In ancient Indian polity an minister was known as ‘Prakasacara’, i.e. a declared asset. Although Manu has not used any similar term for the minister, yet the system of working he has suggested for the minister is nothing but a form of espionage. According to Manu an minister is responsible for concinnity or disaffection among the king. Regarding the mode of working of an minister, Manu has stated that, after entering a foreign state an minister should observe the acts, and deeds of the king of that state and should try to guess the rival lords station through his gestures, postures and behaviours towards his retainers. After knowing the intentions of the rival king, an minister should take the applicable measures, so that the interest of his own party isn't baffled. It's clear that the duties specified by Manu for an minister are nothing but the duties of a asset. Manu has presented an elaborate executive system. In this system there should be a sovereign for every vill, and a sovereign independently upon every unit of similar ten, twenty, hundred and a thousand vill. A government menial having the status of secretarial skeleton or saciva, should be appointed to look after the acts and deeds of the said

autocrats. The saciva should have his own band of intelligencers to look after the matters related to the interest of the state legislated by the persons beginning from the sovereign of a vill upto the sovereign of a thousand villege.

In connection with spying upon these rulers engaged by the king himself, Manu in the very next sloka (7.123) says that the government servants are in most cases cheats and appropriators of other's money and property. Hence the king should protect his subjects from these persons connected with administration. Manu's attention on the institution of spying can easily be understood from his enumeration of the duties of a king.

In this enumeration of eight kinds of most important business of a king, Manu mentions the institution of spying twice, once with the words ‘Pranidhinam ca cestitam’ i.e. supervising the mode of working of his spies (Sloka- 153) and again with the word ‘Pancavarga’ i.e. knowing about the group of five types of spies (sloka- 154).

Among the eight important duties of a king two are directly connected with the institution of spying. Four others are indirectly connected with it.

The term ‘Pancavarga’ in the sloka no-154 of the 7th chapter, has been used to signify the five classes of spies. Kulluka Bhatta, the renowned commentator on ‘Manusamhita’ thus writes the five classes (Kapatika, Udasthita, Grhapatika, Vaidehaka, Tapasa). Medhatithi in his commentary on this sloka (sloka no. 154) has described in details the characteristics, mode of working and the subsistence of these five classes of spies. In his exposition

here Medhatithi has followed Kautilya's Arthasastra (Arthasastra: Book-1, Chapter 11) almost literally.

Manu advises the king to ascertain the strength of the enemy as well as of his own self for the protection and growth of the state. For ascertaining the strength of both the sides, Manu mentions three methods, viz. i) appointment of spies, ii) encouragement of own army and iii) performance of duties. Of these three methods encouragement of the army and performance of duties are the ways to ascertain the king's own strength, while the appointment of spies is the only way to know the strength of the enemy.

As the spies played an important role in ancient Indian administrative system, our authors on polity were very much careful in the matter of selection of suitable candidates for the post of spies.

In the 'Rg veda' verse vii.87.3, Varuna's spies have been praised with the four remarkable epithets applied to the spies, viz. i) wise, ii) holy, iii) skilled in sacrifices, and iv) the furtherance of the praise songs of the prudent, were used to mention the qualifications of the spies of the Rig vedic society, who belonged to the class of priests.

The 'Ramayana' contains many references to the institution of spying. Ravana's spies are mentioned as pratyayika or faithful, sura or heroic, dhira or unperturbed, and asadhvasa or fearless.

According to 'Mahabharata' the spies should resemble the bodily formation of an imbecile, a blind or a deaf person. They should be able to tolerate hunger, thirst and diligence. The spies should be

learned and should stand the test regarding their truthfulness, faithfulness and loyalty.

Kautilya on many contexts has referred to the qualifications of the spies. He for example, while describing the appointment and classification, gives different qualifications for different types of spies. According to him, a kapatika spy should be skillful person capable of guessing the mind of others. An udasthita, a grhapatika and a vaidehaka spy should be possessed of foresight and pure character. A tiksna spy should be a brave and desperate person, reckless of his own life. A rasada spy should be selected from the persons who have no trace of filial affection left in them and who are very cruel and indolent in nature.

Kamandaki, the renowned author on Indian polity, has referred that, persons capable of understanding the minds and gestures of others, having good memory, mild in temperament, having capacity of speedy movement, painstaking, diligent, expert and influential are fit to be appointed spies.

Somadeva, the author of 'Nitisutra', has mentioned only four qualities of a spy. The four qualities are -

- (i) alaulyam or greedlessness,
- (ii) amandyam or unsluggishness,
- (iii) amrsabhasitvam or truthfulness and
- (iv) abhyuhakatvam or power of argument.

We can thus gather a fair idea about what our ancient authors thought regarding the quality and qualifications of a spy.

The department of spies occupied a very important place in the administration of a state in Ancient India. A complete network of spies used to spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. Their

work was considered to be of utmost importance. It kept the rulers posted with the activities, affections and operations of political adversaries, disloyal and disgruntled elements, columnists and foreign powers.

Spies were advised to be planted everywhere so that they could visit every place and watch everything unceasingly. They are considered one of the eight limbs of army. In 'Ramayana' Surpanakha says to his brother Ravana that without confidence no king can rule the kingdom. In early period, people could not imagine a king without spies.

Kautilya had given high position to spies. Their work is so important that the king is obliged to give a daily audience to the reports of these agents. The king was supposed to give sufficient time to understand the activities of the spies, viz. a portion of time 12 to 1:30 p.m. was devoted to understanding the secret reports from spies written in cryptic characters, 6 to 7 p.m. to interview with spies, and a portion of the period from 3 a.m. to 4:30 a.m. to sending out spies on their errands. It is evident that king was always in contact with spies and spent a long duration with them. King was fully depending upon the information of spies. After the battle, king at once met the spies to know the condition. In evening after his daily worship, king used to hear the secrets shared by the spies and then decided the programme.

The spies seem to have been largely employed then not merely to ascertain validity or invalidity in the statements of parties and witnesses, but also gather correct and reliable information as to the movements of any inimical tendency or

disposition. Kautilya gave an institutionalized form to the secret service to maintain and to watch over seducible and non seducible elements in the state. Spies not only collected the information by overhearing conversation or through sources but also they provoked the people and got their secrets. The bureaucrats and ministers had to be cultivated, and their weaknesses were exploited by secret agents. Secret agents provided their services not only on their own land but in foreign countries also. In relation to foreign states, political form of espionage involved an attempt to get into touch through secret emissaries with the discontented or disloyal elements in the hostile state, and utilize their services for the destruction of the latter.

Secret agents played a very important role in every walk of life viz. political, military, economic or social life. They achieved a high position in the state and were considered as the eyes and ears of the king. Indian political writers have very systematically and assiduously established that the success of all governments depend on their capability to effectively implement the rule of law, which in turn depends on the performance of spy system.

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