MYTH AND KAUTALYA'S ARTHASASTRA

Dieses Baums Blatt, der von Osten
Meinem Garten's anvertraut,
Gibt geheimen Sinn zu kosten,
Wies den Wissenden erbaut.

-- Goethe[1]
"Ginko Biloba"

Deception and awakening , illusion and enlightenment, are themes which link art to war and politics. Myth can be used simultaneously for both purposes as it is in classical India. In Kautalya's Arthasastra myth educates the monarch while deceiving his enemies. In the Buddhist texts discarding myth leads to a condition of heightened awareness or understanding while also representing the deceptive maya, or illusion, which obscures truth. Particularly in war and politics, but also in art, the awakening may be a very rude experience. Politicians, generals, and artists, not to mention educators, can be extremely gentle or extremely rude and brutal in participating in the mythological form of the "great game."

The "great game" is an image used to describe the contest between Russian and British agents in the north of India, across the Khyber Pass, and into Afghan territory. Although the players have changed slightly, it was played again in the Russo-Afghan War. In an ageless fashion, just as in three card monte or the old

shell game, politicians make the markers vanish. Sometimes the players disappear for the Hindu Kush. It was in the fifth century B.C. that the Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya reduced the "great game" to an art in a lengthy treatise on public administration. His critical contribution to political thinking is very simply that in order to survive the players must create myths. The successful ruler is a successful mythmaker. In searching for an analogy in Western thought one thinks of Cagliostro with his alchemic and masonic schemes, his deception of Marie Antoinette in the "Diamond Necklace Affair," and his attempted deception of Catherine the Great. Both Cagliostro and Kautalya demonstrated gamesmanship, but Kautalya (as best we know or is his prime ministership also an illusion?) held power. Both are players and both are aware of the power of myth.

Parts of the "game" have been reduced to scandals and swindles. Let the unwary public aware, for no one knows yet whether the pyramids of Social Security and Medicare are grand Ponzi schemes or not. Cutpurses have been replaced by more sophisticated "pigeon-droppers" in which the "mark" (or taxpayer?) consents to a sure-fire-get-rich-quick scheme by which he faithfully invests his savings in a joint endeavor and ends up holding a brown bag full of shreded newspaper. There are also "chain letters" in which a curse is put on anyone who breaks the chain. There are fake stock market transactions and after the race has been run bets. The variety of the scams never ceases to amaze. As Machiavelli realizes, for the game to succeed requires a combination of gullible and superstitious victims with adept and imaginative myth-makers. Although Kautilya counsels against bilking the public, or the prince's subjects, he advocates any possible deception against the royal enemies. Mythmaking was the order of the day, and this was a period when mythmaking was easy, less encumbered with taboos and ethics commissions and corrupt practices. Dirty politics and "dirty tricks" coexisted very comfortably with benign monarchs. Of course, Buddha would not have approved, but Kautalya would have found Buddha as well as any Brahmins who might disagree with his schemes to be a little other-worldly. The teachings of artha, or wealth, are very much "of this world."

Kautalya, for example, counsels his ruler to go to the court of an enemy king

with a tale of treasure and draw him out to a secluded place in order to assassinate him. Dumb, well yes, but look at James VI and the Gowrie Plot in which the King is lured, or did he make up the story after the fact, to the Gowrie's house with the tale of a crock of gold. Suddenly James is at an upper window screaming treason and bloody murder, but it is the Earl of Gowrie who is killed. The King alleges an assassination conspiracy. Fortunately we can leave the Gowrie Conspiracy with that auld Scotswoman who said that one of the greatest rewards of the Day of Judgment would be the revelation of who did what to whom.

Now neither King nor Earl had read Kautalya. The scheme was a natural part of a con-game playing upon greed and/or fear that foreign gold was being imported to finance a papist plot. The point is that the same strategy of deception worked well in seventeenth century Scotland that is advised for ancient India, not that Kautalya tried all of his own devices, which also include invisibility potions to be used by spies and assassins. The cross-cultural nature of myth in the human experience is reinforced by Zimmer's Philosophies of India which relates the tale of the sage who was trying to illustrate the precept that "all the world is Maya" to his royal pupil. To test the thesis that all is illusion or myth the pupil releases a mad elephant on the philosopher (such are the hazards of teaching esoteric doctrines). The sage scoots up the nearest palm tree. The king with great satisfaction asks why the teacher (and the Indian tradition does insist on worshipping fire and honoring teachers) fled so hastily from a non-real elephant, an illusion. Well, you know how devious philosophers are, so the sage answers that it was a non-real he who the king had imagined scuttled up an equally non-real palm tree. Again, there are limits to myth. There is, however, a parallel to an anecdote told of a preacher in Houston's 5th Ward who had met the devil in Louisiana and was insisting that he could not be harmed, when he was hit by a tomato from the congregation, but it was merely a spiritual tomato. Another Indian sage teaching the doctrine that all things are God was also confronted by a rampaging elephant and prudently decided to step aside when god came to confront god. Kautalya, as we will see, is not particularly respectful of the traditional religious teachings. He is more interested in using religion

to obtain power or advantage. Thus he will advise using the enemy king's favorite idol as a "Trojan horse" to conceal weapons or assassins or using the disguise of an ascetic to conceal a spy.

India serves as a gateway to myth-making and Kautalya as the first gateway to India, but placing Kautalya in his appropriate cultural context is not an easy task. We do have Megasthenes' account, the Indica, but the most important element was probably the impact of Alexander the Great's conquest, which must have unsettled traditional cultural values. Kautalya's role was the reintegration of power after the culrure shock. Here he turns to some very realistic international politics: a balance of power, third world neutrality, systematically developed espionage, assassination, and arson. Somewhat oddly he supports a Machiavellian amoral realism but tempers it with an Aristotelean moral state. The ruler may take any measures to consolidate his position, but he does so for the good of his subjects. Indeed he regulates justice and the economy on their behalf. Kautalya's ruler is unconcerned with any legitimizing myth. He rules by virtue of his power. Although he rules for the public good, he recommends using myths to terrify a village into paying its taxes. A fake demon may inhabit a tree and refuse to be exorcised until the taxes are paid. A smoking monster on the local lake may have an equally intimidating effect. We may think of Salmoneus, King of Elis, who made use of artificial thunder to intimidate his subjects. Not all of Kautalya's stratagems are too sophisticated, and one wonders if he had imbibed too much of his favorite recipe for honey beer, used to get the royal counsellors drunk.

The flexibility and adaptiveness of India's mythological structure is one of the reasons that it survives so well. It was easy to incorporate Alexander the Great into an already overcrowded pantheon of Hindu gods. It was somewhat less amusing to the nineteenth century British general Nicholson to be deified outside the gates of Delhi as Nikal-sen, what with the missionaries trying to stamp out heathenism in Borioboola-gha, a tedious piece of work that. There is, however, hardly a better case in point for the emotions magnified by mythology than the Sepoy Rebellion. If the natives had to bite cartridges, they came into contact with grease. If it was beef, the Hindus were offended; if pork, the Moslems.

Nonetheless the Hindu religion is flexible, and Kautilya does manipulate belief for his own purposes. Magic or the appearance of it is even introduced into the legal system as a means of discovering criminals. Priestly power itself is largely a function of the individual personality. Perhaps the marvelous syncretism can again be summarized by the figure of Mahisamardini, the great Myth-Mother, who holds all of the attributes of power, and subdues Mahisa, the buffalo king.[3] In no other sense does Kautilya deal with anything which resembles legitimacy or a "state of nature" although it might easily be imagined as a rulerless state, the Indian condition or indifferently the Periclean one in which "the big fish eats the little one" (matsyanyaya). Myth is the means to obtain and stabilize power.

Power in Indian thought is divided in at least three ways: Kama, dharma, and artha. Kama is the power of love as in the erotic treatise, the Kamasutra. It has both sacred and profane dimensions. Dharma is virtue and incorporates the concept of the performance of duty, the subjects' duties to the king and reciprocal responsibilities. The practice of dharma may lead to all sorts of asceticism such as fire-walking where we are uncertain whether we are dealing with illusion or successful myth. There is a story of Nagasena in The Questions of King Milinda, that of Asoka and Bindumati.[4] There is a rampaging flood in which the king summons all of his royal experts to stay the torrents. The royal engineer fails because he possessed little dharma and so on down the line of court officials. Finally the royal prostitute arrives. She is very good at what she does. The waters part and fall back in the presence of her dharma. The concept resembles Plato's idea of arete, but while Plato exists in splendid isolation of foreign policy and Aristotle in splendid innocence, Kautalya develops a systematic power politics which includes not only personal dharma but rajadharma, the art of ruling. There is, of course, a faint possibility of a link between Kautalya and the Greek philosophers. Megasthenes does not mention him, but then Josephus virtually ignores Jesus Christ. The third division of power, artha itself, deals with material possessions and wealth, perhaps a little more generally in resources and resourcefulness, which are the main subjects of Kautalya's treatise. There are other important concepts which support the system

including moksha, freedom or liberation from the wheel ofthings; karma, or destiny, and danda, or punishment

One of the most interesting features of the Arthasastra is the manner in which the concepts are popularized or remythologized in the folk tradition of the Panchatantra and the jataka tales. Thus the "parliament of fowls" debates the utility of the various anghas, or strategies of foreign policy in "The War Between the Crows and the Owls." Kautalya also influences the more formal literary tradition and indeed is a leading character (Chanakya) in Vishakadatta's "The Signet Ring of Rakshasa" with its forgery, duplicity, intrigue, and poisoning all used to achieve a laudable reconciliation. The play is true to the spirit if not the fact of Chandragupta's struggle against the Nanda kings. Even if there is the occasional cynicism of imperial new clothes, the realities of power are never completely lost.[5] Similar tales migrate from India to Byzantium in the form of the stories of Stephanites and Ichnelates, for example, "The Fable of the Lion, the Ox, and the Jackal" on theking's means of selecting his ministers.[6]

Another animal tale was told by Sri Ramakrishna of the tiger cub among goats. As he bleats and eats grass, the cub is discovered by an old tiger. The old tiger forces him to eat bloody meat and takes him to a well to show him his reflection. He tells the cub that tigers should behave as tigers and not as goats. At this point the tiger cub recognizes his own true nature and gives out a massive "roar of awakening almost a primal shriek. The goat illusion is destroyed. The tiger emerges. The story in turn allows its audience to discover their true identities through myth to answer Kim's eternal question: "Who am I?" "Who is Kim?" [7]

In a way that great "roar of awakening" links Hindu and Buddist teaching and points to a basic function of political mythology. Kautalya's deceptive mythos, however, contrasts starkly with the Buddist liberating mythos. In one sense the Arthasastra deals with coping with a contracting political universe whereas the Buddhist scriptures deal with an expaning one. There is asimilarity to those problems faced by the Stoics and the Epicureans in ancient Rome. The Buddhist "abnegation"of power is far distant from the thoughts of Kautalya's ideal ruler,

but there is a shared mythological quality.

Unlike Kautalya Buddha teaches that it is "possible to exercise governance without smiting nor letting others slay, without conquering nor causing others to conquer, without sorrowing nor making others sorrow righteously. . ."[8] When naga and nagena (great man and elephant) meet, the Buddha's awesome spiritual power stills the mad beast sent by Devadatta to destroy him. A tathagata cannot be destroyed in violent fashion but must die in the normal course of things, part of that great inter linked chain of being and causality. He seeks enlightenment, achieves it, overcoming the world's 108 illusions. He practices the eightfold Aryan path: "Right views, right aims, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindedness, right concentration."[9] He discovers the Way, or the path, the route that the pilgrim must take to be liberated of self: "and, they Ananda, who shall die while they, with believing heart, are journeying on such pilgrimage, shall be reborn after death, when the body shall dissolve, in the happy realm of heaven."[10] And when Kalamas asks him how to separate truth from falsehood as a doubting Thomas might, he maintains that too rigid a belief in teachers or traditions is as bad as too flexible a faith. Doubt and questioning have their own values.[11]

There is also the problem of miracle and illusion in a system bent on destroying illusions. Buddha is endowed with supernatural powers which he uses to "soften the proud hearts of the Sakyas."[12] in the "miracle of the pairs" in which he ascends skywar "trailing clouds of glory." Elsewhere he causes invisibility, yet he also counels his followers not to perform miracles simply for the sake of miracles. It is the evil principle Mara who makes the most use of the power of "mental creation" to generate false illusions, for example, the three female forms that are to destroy the Buddha's meditations in the manner of the temptation of St. Antony and the showing of the temptations of power in the form of the kingdoms of the world, which parallels Satan's temptation of Christ. In these instances illusions are created to further the purposes of evil, or mythological power is abused.

The nature of illusion in Buddhism varies from the false illusions created by Devadatta in his attempt to assassinate the Buddha and the temptations of Mara, to the simple story of the description of the blind men and the elephant in which men fall to quarreling over the description of the elephant because each has seen only part of the whole, the tail, the broom; the tusks, the plowshare. Each labors under the illusion that he has portrayed the whole truth, but it is well to remember that even when Borges' cartographers have created a map which coresponds exactly to the features of their country in size and detail, they still get lost, now perhaps because of their scientific exactitude. We will later return to the interesting analogies between Buddhist mythology and quantum mechanics as well as the interconnectedness of chaos theory. Both sets of myths as well as their Christian counterparts lead us in the direction of transcendent "truths" which go beyond mere empirical observation.

"Enter the path! There is no grief like Hate!
No pains like passion, no deceit like sense!
Enter the path! . . ."

-- Edwin Arnold
The Light of Asia
or The Great Renunciation
Mahabhinishkramana

NOTES:

1. Goethe

2. Kautilya, Arthasastra (1968); the earlier editions by R. Shanasastry are very useful; Cf. Charles Drekmeier, Kingship and Community in Early India (1967); George Modelski, "Kautilya:Foreign Policy and International System in the Ancient Hindu World," pp549-61, APSR. LVIII#3 (1966).

3. Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of Ancient India (1951).

4. The Questions of King Milinda, The Sacred Books of the East (1890).

5. Panchatantra, Arthur W. Ryder, trans. (1923).

5. Ernest Barker, Social and Political Thought in Byzantium from Justinian I to the last Paleologus (1957), pp. 141-45.

7. Cf. Colin Wilson, The Outsider (1956), p. 259.

8. E.H. Brewster, The Life of Gotama The Buddha (1975), p. 135.

9. Robert Allen Mitchell, The Buddha His Life Retold (1989), pp 34-35.

10. Brewster, op. cit., p. 212.

11. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 143.

12. Ibid., p. 75.

13. Edwin Arnold, The Light of Asia (1885), p. 190. On the culture and mythology of India Cf. Heinrich R. Zimmer, The King and the Corpse, New York: Pantheon , 1967; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays, New York: Noonday Press, 1957.