

Elephants and Kingship: A Study of the Arthaśāstra

Krishna Kumar Mandal

ABSTRACT

Taxation system and standing army are two important sources of Indian kingship. One cannot imagine a state without taxation system and standing army. In any case the maintenance of a large professional army was made because of a well-organised taxation system just as the collection of taxes was facilitated because of the existence of a coercive authority. This interconnection is stressed by Kauṭilya. The *Arthaśāstra* enumerates seven elements (*saptāṅga*) of the state such as *svāmī*, *amātya*, *janapada*, *durga*, *kośa*, *daṇḍa* and *mītra*, suggesting thereby *daṇḍa* is an important element, consisting of soldiers comprising infantry, chariots, elephants and cavalry. This manifests that the elephant is deeply embedded in Indian kingship. At the same time, elephants symbolise wealth and power. Elephants are large, possibly visible sign of military potential, of a substantial living force at the command of a king. The display of war elephants in the royal procession was, after all, the display of war assets. It has effects upon other kings who were always assessing the strengths of the various assets of their neighbours. It is a reflection of war elephant as repertoire of Indian kingship. Kauṭilya assumes elephant forests (*hastivana*) on the border of the king, guarded by forest people (*aṭavī*). The *Arthaśāstra* refers to the superintendent of the elephant (*hastyadhyakṣa*) and the elephants guards (*nāgavanāpāla*) are to protect them and prescribes death punishment for those who kill elephants. The text mentions the superintendent of elephants shall protect elephant forests (*nāgavana*) located near hills, rivers, lakes or marshy land with the help of elephant-forest wardens (*nāgavanāpāla*). The elephant forest wardens assisted by elephant keepers (*hastipaka*), foot-chainers (*pādapāśika*), border guards (*saimika*), forest ranger (*vanacaraka*) and attendants (*pārikarmika*). These, disguising their scent with the urine and dung of elephants and concealing themselves with the branches of trees, should move with five or seven female elephant decoys to “find out the size of elephant herds by means of signs provided by sleeping places, foot-prints, dung and damage caused to riverbanks” and “keep a written record of elephants— those moving in herds, those moving alone, those driven from a herd and leaders of herds, as well as those that are dangerous in must, the youngsters and those released from captivity.” They should capture elephants that, in the judgement of elephant trainers (*anikastha*), have excellent marks and demeanor. The text mentions that victory (in battle) for a king depends principally on elephants. For, elephants, being possessed of very

big-sized bodies and being capable of life-destroying activities, pound the troops, battle-arrays, fortresses and camps of enemies. In fact, kings are drawn to elephants because of their size which is useful to kings as a signifier of the superlative character of kingship. Keeping all these things in mind the paper attempts to delineate the relationship between elephants and kingship on the basis of *Arthaśāstra*.

Keywords: *Kautilya, kingship, Arthaśāstra, daṇḍa, hastivana.*

Dept. of History, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur

E-mail: kkm_tmbu@rediffmail.com