

## KAUTILYA'S ARTHASHASTRA AS A PILLAR OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY

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### Abstract

*This paper explores Kautilya's Arthashastra as a foundational text within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), highlighting its multidimensional contributions to ancient and modern governance. Composed in the 4th century BCE, the Arthashastra is not merely a political treatise but a comprehensive guide encompassing philosophy, ethics, economics, administration, law, military strategy, and diplomacy. The study examines the philosophical underpinnings of the text, including the integration of Dharma, Artha, and Nyaya, and assesses its relevance in the domains of public administration, economic regulation, legal justice, and foreign policy. Emphasis is placed on core concepts such as the Saptanga Theory, Mandala Theory, and Shadgunya Policy, which demonstrate an advanced understanding of statecraft and strategic governance. Furthermore, the paper situates the Arthashastra within contemporary discourse, particularly in light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, arguing for its inclusion in interdisciplinary education and policy reform. By doing so, it positions the Arthashastra as a living tradition of applied knowledge capable of informing ethical and effective leadership in the modern world.*

**Keywords:** Arthashastra, Dharma, Governance, Indian Knowledge Systems, Kautilya

### Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent an expansive and deeply rooted intellectual tradition that has evolved over millennia within the Indian subcontinent. These systems encompass a diverse range of traditional sciences, including philosophy, medicine, astronomy, agriculture, mathematics, governance, and linguistics, among others. Rooted in ancient texts and oral traditions, IKS offer a holistic approach to knowledge—one that integrates theoretical understanding with practical application, and moral philosophy with utilitarian concerns. Far from being compartmentalized, these knowledge systems are inherently interdisciplinary, blending spiritual insight with empirical observation, and aiming for a harmonious balance between individual well-being and societal order. IKS do not merely seek to explain the world but also aim to transform it through dharmic (righteous and ethical) action, ensuring that knowledge serves both personal growth and the collective good.

Among the foundational texts that exemplify the spirit and breadth of Indian Knowledge Systems is the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta. Composed around the 4th century BCE, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a magnum opus of political and administrative thought. Kautilya, who served as the chief minister to Chandragupta Maurya—the founder of the Maurya Empire, crafted this treatise not merely as a manual for rulers, but as an extensive guide covering all aspects of governance, statecraft, economics, justice, military strategy, diplomacy,

and social order. The term *Arthashastra* itself translates to “the science of wealth” or “the treatise on polity,” indicating its dual focus on material prosperity (*artha*) and the art of rulership (*shastra*). However, the *Arthashastra* is far more than a political document. It is a text that embodies the depth of ancient Indian epistemology, providing insights into how a well-ordered society could be built and sustained through knowledge, discipline, and ethical governance. It integrates the principles of Rajadharma (duty of the king) with pragmatic policy-making, reflecting an approach where morality and strategy coalesce. As such, it serves not only as a reflection of ancient India's political thought but also as a source of enduring relevance for modern discussions on administration, law, economy, and international relations. This paper seeks to examine Kautilya's *Arthashastra* through a multidisciplinary lens, highlighting its role as a foundational pillar of Indian Knowledge Systems and exploring its philosophical, political, economic, legal, and strategic dimensions.

### Philosophical And Ethical Foundations

The *Arthashastra* is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical traditions that emphasize the harmonious integration of Dharma (righteous conduct), Artha (material prosperity), and Nyaya (justice). These three concepts are not treated as isolated ideals but as interconnected pillars that sustain a just and prosperous society. Unlike the purely pragmatic or cynical approaches found in certain strands of Western political realism, Kautilya's worldview exhibits a nuanced balance

between realpolitik and ethical responsibility. Governance, in the Kautilyan framework, is not solely concerned with the acquisition and maintenance of power—it is also fundamentally concerned with the moral and spiritual obligations of the ruler toward the state and its people.

In Kautilya's conceptualization, the king is not merely a political authority but a Dharmic figure, entrusted with the sacred duty of ensuring the well-being of his subjects. His primary responsibility lies in protecting the people, maintaining order, and enabling conditions for both economic prosperity and ethical living. This idea is encapsulated in the concept of Rajadharma—the code of conduct and duties specifically prescribed for rulers. Rajadharma requires the sovereign to uphold justice, administer fair governance, ensure economic stability, and sustain moral order. It demands that the ruler act as a guardian of the state who combines strength with compassion, and prudence with fairness.

While Kautilya endorses the use of strategy, manipulation, and even deception in statecraft when necessary, he does not abandon ethical considerations altogether. The *Arthashastra* clearly articulates that the means employed by the ruler must ultimately serve the legitimate ends of peace, stability, and public welfare. In this regard, the text supports what may be called "strategic realism"—an approach that allows for practical and even harsh decisions in governance, but only insofar as they contribute to the long-term benefit of the realm. Ends and means are judged not in isolation but in context, with the ultimate criterion being the preservation of order and the greater good. Thus, even when advocating covert operations or realpolitik diplomacy, Kautilya anchors his policies within a larger framework of ethical governance and collective prosperity.

This philosophical depth is what distinguishes the *Arthashastra* as not merely a manual of politics, but a text of enduring relevance in discussions about the moral dimensions of power, responsibility, and statecraft.

### Political Science And Public Administration

The *Arthashastra* holds a significant place in the history of political thought as one of the earliest and most comprehensive texts on statecraft and administrative science. It offers a well-articulated vision of governance rooted in systemic organization, strategic planning, and bureaucratic efficiency—elements that continue to form the foundation of modern political and administrative studies. Kautilya's insights, based on empirical observations and intellectual synthesis, reflect a profound understanding of how states function,

sustain themselves, and thrive in both peace and conflict.

One of the central contributions of the *Arthashastra* to political theory is the Saptanga Theory—a holistic model that conceptualizes the state as comprising seven essential and interdependent elements. These are: Swami (the ruler or sovereign), Amatya (ministers or officials), Janapada (territory and its people), Durga (fortified cities and infrastructure), Kosa (the treasury and financial resources), Danda (the military or coercive power), and Mitra (allies or friendly states). This model presents the state not merely as a territorial entity, but as a complex organism whose health and stability depend on the coordinated functioning of all its parts. Each element has a defined role and contributes to the resilience and prosperity of the kingdom. The Saptanga model thus anticipates what in modern terms might be described as systems theory in governance, emphasizing the interconnectivity and equilibrium necessary for effective administration.

The *Arthashastra* further provides detailed guidelines for creating a robust administrative framework, complete with clearly delineated departments, portfolios, and chains of command. It discusses the qualifications and responsibilities of ministers, secretaries, clerks, accountants, and inspectors, illustrating a high degree of specialization. The treatise advocates for a merit-based selection of officials and includes mechanisms for accountability, supervision, and periodic evaluation. It prescribes rigorous checks to prevent corruption, inefficiency, and disloyalty. In doing so, the text demonstrates a proto-modern understanding of governance, one that values order, institutional integrity, and ethical administration. The king is advised to surround himself with competent and loyal advisors and to delegate power without abdicating control.

One of the most striking aspects of Kautilya's administrative vision is his emphasis on espionage and intelligence gathering as indispensable tools of governance. The *Arthashastra* devotes considerable attention to the creation of a covert intelligence network comprising spies from different backgrounds—ascetics, merchants, householders, and reformed criminals—each tasked with infiltrating different levels of society and political systems. These spies not only monitored public sentiment and internal dissent but also provided crucial information about enemy states, court intrigues, and bureaucratic corruption. Surveillance was seen as essential for maintaining internal security and preempting rebellion or betrayal. This intelligence apparatus underscores Kautilya's realistic approach to governance: while ideals are

important, knowledge of ground realities is critical for effective rule.

Overall, the *Arthashastra* presents a sophisticated model of political organization and public administration, remarkable in its depth and foresight. Its principles of efficient bureaucracy, strategic intelligence, decentralized power, and holistic state management continue to offer valuable insights to scholars and policymakers even today. As such, it stands not only as an ancient manual of governance but also as a timeless treatise on political science.

### **Economic Governance And Resource Management**

The *Arthashastra* presents a remarkably advanced and nuanced vision of economic governance, one that resonates with many principles found in modern developmental economics. Kautilya's approach to economic management is both practical and philosophical, aiming not only at wealth accumulation but also at the equitable distribution of resources, sustainability, and the overall welfare of the state. In the context of Indian Knowledge Systems, the *Arthashastra* reflects an indigenous economic model that integrates material prosperity (Artha) with ethical governance (Dharma), thereby establishing a balanced framework of state-led development.

One of the foundational pillars of this economic model is the revenue collection system, which is elaborately discussed in the text. Kautilya provides meticulous guidelines for levying taxes on agriculture, trade, crafts, and urban transactions. Land revenue—based on the fertility of land and the type of crops cultivated—formed the primary source of state income. The treatise also outlines duties on imports and exports, tolls at city gates, fees for licenses, and penalties for violations of economic laws. Importantly, Kautilya recommends a flexible tax regime, encouraging the ruler to adjust taxes according to the needs and capacities of citizens, especially in times of distress such as famine or war. This reflects an early recognition of progressive taxation and fiscal responsiveness, underscoring the economic sensibilities embedded in ancient Indian governance.

Equally significant is the text's emphasis on state control over key industries and natural resources, which reveals a form of early regulated capitalism. The *Arthashastra* recommends direct state involvement in the production and distribution of essential goods, especially in sectors such as mining, forestry, metallurgy, textiles, salt production, and armaments. These state-run enterprises were intended not only to generate revenue but also to ensure national security,

resource sustainability, and fair employment. The king, as the guardian of national wealth, was expected to prevent monopolies, curb exploitation, and invest in productive sectors. Kautilya's prescriptions highlight an understanding of economic central planning, where strategic industries are shielded from private misuse while remaining accountable to the public good.

Moreover, the *Arthashastra* contains comprehensive directives on market regulation, which are strikingly modern in their orientation. Kautilya advocates for the standardization of weights and measures, fixed pricing in essential commodities, surveillance of marketplaces, and strict action against black marketing and hoarding. Officials such as the Panyadhyaksha (Superintendent of Trade) and Sulka Adhyaksha (Customs Officer) were responsible for regulating trade, preventing fraud, ensuring fair wages, and maintaining the quality of goods. These mechanisms were designed not only to preserve market integrity but also to protect consumers and producers from exploitation. In this sense, the *Arthashastra* anticipates the principles of consumer protection laws and fair trade practices long before they were formally codified in modern economies.

The overarching economic philosophy reflected in the *Arthashastra* is one of sustainability, equity, and regulation. Kautilya envisions a state that plays an active, yet ethical role in economic management—balancing profit with public interest, and growth with stability. His integrated approach, where economics is inseparable from governance, justice, and ethics, embodies the core ideals of Indian Knowledge Systems. As a result, the *Arthashastra* remains not only a testament to ancient India's administrative brilliance but also a source of enduring relevance in contemporary discussions on developmental economics, resource governance, and public policy.

### **Legal Systems And Social Justice**

The *Arthashastra* provides one of the earliest and most structured expositions of legal theory and practice in ancient India, emphasizing the rule of law as a cornerstone of stable governance. It lays down a comprehensive legal framework that addresses both civil and criminal jurisprudence, establishing principles of justice, fairness, and administrative discipline. The legal system described by Kautilya is not only meant to punish wrongdoers but also to ensure harmony, regulate social relations, and uphold dharma (righteous conduct) in a diverse and hierarchical society. By integrating jurisprudence within the larger framework of governance, the *Arthashastra* affirms law as a vital instrument of statecraft.

A notable aspect of Kautilya's legal system is the classification of courts and judicial officials, reflecting a sophisticated and decentralized judicial structure. The text identifies various categories of judges and administrators, each assigned specific legal functions depending on their rank and jurisdiction. There were courts for civil disputes, criminal offenses, commercial transactions, and family issues, each with its own procedural norms and appellate mechanisms. The king was considered the highest judicial authority, expected to dispense justice impartially, often advised by learned Brahmins and legal experts. However, much of the judicial burden was delegated to appointed judges and bureaucrats, creating an institutionalized system where the administration of justice was integrated into the state's functioning. This codified delegation highlights a proto-modern legal bureaucracy, ensuring that law and governance were not arbitrary but consistent and institutionalized.

The *Arthashastra* also outlines detailed trial procedures, emphasizing the importance of due process, rational investigation, and the use of evidence. It prescribes methods for examination of witnesses, verification of documents, and establishment of facts before delivering a judgment. Perjury, fabrication of evidence, and biased rulings were subject to penalties, reflecting the text's emphasis on judicial integrity. The penal code was proportionate and varied according to the nature and gravity of the offense, with distinctions between intentional crimes, negligence, and acts committed under duress. Punishments included fines, corporal penalties, and in rare cases, capital punishment, but the overarching aim was deterrence and restoration of social balance rather than mere retribution. The codification of these legal practices underscores Kautilya's vision of a rational and evidence-based judicial system.

Importantly, the *Arthashastra* reflects a progressive concern for social justice, especially in the context of its time. While the text accepts the existence of a hierarchical social structure based on varna (class) and jati (caste), it provides protective legal provisions for vulnerable and marginalized groups, including laborers, artisans, women, and slaves. Kautilya prescribes fair wages, regulated working hours, and safety protocols for laborers engaged in construction, agriculture, and industry. Artisans were granted legal protection from exploitation by employers or state officials. The rights of women are discussed in considerable detail, covering property ownership, dowry, divorce, and protection from abuse. Though patriarchal in structure, the legal code recognizes women as legal persons with entitlements and recourse to justice. Slaves, too,

were offered some safeguards against inhumane treatment, and manumission was allowed under certain conditions, indicating a moral awareness within the legal order.

In essence, the legal framework of the *Arthashastra* reflects a deep engagement with justice, order, and social responsibility, far ahead of its time. It balances state authority with individual rights, power with accountability, and punishment with compassion. These legal principles are not merely administrative tools but are rooted in the larger dharmic vision of society where the king, as the upholder of justice, is bound to protect not only the powerful but also the powerless. As such, the *Arthashastra* remains a foundational text in the evolution of Indian jurisprudence and continues to inspire modern discussions on the integration of law with ethics, governance, and social equity.

### **Military Strategy And Foreign Policy**

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is not only a manual of governance and economics but also a profound treatise on military strategy and foreign policy, marking a pioneering contribution to the field of strategic studies. His understanding of war, diplomacy, and interstate relations is both empirically grounded and theoretically robust. Kautilya approaches international relations with a keen awareness of realpolitik, yet anchors it within the larger framework of dharmic responsibility and national security. His detailed prescriptions for handling both internal and external threats demonstrate a sophisticated grasp of power dynamics and strategic planning. The *Arthashastra* thus lays the foundation for an indigenous tradition of geopolitics that continues to influence contemporary Indian strategic thought.

One of the most influential concepts presented in the *Arthashastra* is the Mandala Theory, which outlines a dynamic and context-sensitive model of foreign policy. According to this theory, the international arena is composed of concentric circles of neighboring states, each categorized based on their relationship to the central kingdom. The theory posits that an immediate neighbor is likely to be a natural adversary, while the neighbor's neighbor may be a potential ally. This creates a circular pattern—or *mandala*—of alternating hostility and alliance. The Mandala Theory allows the king to position his state strategically by forging alliances with distant powers to counterbalance local threats. It offers a realistic, fluid, and multi-polar understanding of diplomacy, emphasizing the need for continuous reassessment of the political landscape. The idea is not to create permanent enemies or allies, but to

adapt relations according to changing circumstances and strategic interests.

In tandem with the Mandala Theory, Kautilya introduces the Shadgunya Policy, which provides six primary strategies available to a ruler in dealing with other states: Sandhi (peace or treaty), Vighraha (hostility or war), Asana (remaining quiet or neutrality), Yana (preparation for war or expedition), Samsraya (seeking protection or alliance), and Dvaidhibhava (duplicity or making simultaneous peace and war with different powers). These strategies are not mutually exclusive but are to be deployed based on the strengths, weaknesses, and intentions of both the king and his adversaries. The flexibility of this model reflects a deeply contextual approach to statecraft, one that prioritizes strategic timing, resource mobilization, and psychological advantage. Kautilya urges rulers to choose the course of action that most effectively secures long-term national interest, even if it involves temporary compromise or tactical deception.

Kautilya's vision of warfare is equally comprehensive. He categorizes three types of warfare: open war (conventional military engagement), concealed war (use of assassins, sabotage, and internal rebellion), and silent war (propaganda, disinformation, and psychological operations). This tripartite classification indicates an advanced understanding of both kinetic and non-kinetic dimensions of conflict. Far from glorifying violence, the *Arthashastra* promotes war as a last resort, only to be pursued when diplomacy, negotiation, and economic pressure fail. Even then, war is to be conducted with careful planning, resource management, and minimal disruption to civilian life. Kautilya's emphasis on espionage, strategic deception, and morale warfare shows an appreciation for asymmetrical methods that reduce direct confrontation while still achieving political objectives.

The strategic insights embedded in the *Arthashastra* continue to be relevant in the fields of modern political science, international relations, and defense studies. Indian military academies and policy think tanks often revisit Kautilyan principles to draw lessons for contemporary diplomacy and defense planning. Concepts like balancing power blocs, using intelligence as a strategic tool, and engaging in multilateral diplomacy bear striking resemblance to modern doctrines of foreign policy realism. As India navigates an increasingly complex global environment, the foundational ideas in the *Arthashastra* offer enduring wisdom rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, affirming Kautilya's stature as one of the world's earliest and most insightful strategic thinkers.

### The Arthashastra In Contemporary Discourse

In recent years, there has been a growing resurgence of interest in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), driven in part by educational and cultural policy shifts such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This renewed emphasis on integrating indigenous knowledge into mainstream education and policymaking has revived scholarly attention toward classical texts like Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Far from being regarded as an obsolete relic of ancient political thought, the *Arthashastra* is increasingly recognized as a rich source of practical and theoretical insights that can inform modern governance, law, economics, and international relations. Its multidisciplinary nature allows it to transcend disciplinary boundaries, offering a holistic and culturally rooted framework that complements and enriches contemporary academic discourse.

In the realm of public policy and governance, the *Arthashastra* provides enduring lessons on ethical administration, state accountability, and decentralized power structures. Kautilya's emphasis on the welfare of the people, responsiveness of the state to crisis, and meritocratic appointments in the bureaucracy finds relevance in today's democratic institutions. His model of decentralized governance—where local officials are entrusted with regional administration under strict oversight—offers useful parallels for discussions on federalism and local governance in India. Moreover, the text's pragmatic yet ethically anchored approach to governance provides valuable guidance in crafting policies that balance state authority with social justice and welfare. Concepts such as anticipatory governance, strategic resource allocation, and public accountability are embedded in Kautilya's administrative vision and continue to resonate in discussions around modern policy frameworks.

In strategic and geopolitical studies, Kautilya's *Mandala Theory* has found renewed relevance, particularly in the context of India's evolving regional and global diplomatic posture. Scholars and diplomats increasingly draw upon Kautilya's insights to understand India's foreign policy orientation, especially its approach to neighborhood diplomacy, balancing of rival powers, and formation of strategic alliances. The flexibility and realism embedded in the *Shadgunya Policy* and the theory of concentric alliances help interpret contemporary scenarios in South Asian and Indo-Pacific geopolitics. As India navigates complex global dynamics—marked by shifting power equations, economic dependencies, and security concerns—Kautilya's strategic realism offers a

native framework that is both historically grounded and tactically adaptive.

The *Arthashastra* is also gaining attention in legal, economic, and management education. Law schools are re-evaluating the text for its early contributions to constitutional law, legal procedure, and judicial ethics. Management and public administration courses increasingly incorporate Kautilyan principles to illustrate models of leadership, organizational behavior, and institutional governance. Similarly, civil service training programs and policy think tanks are turning to the *Arthashastra* as a repository of indigenous administrative knowledge that blends ethics with efficiency. The treatise's structured approach to human resource management, crisis handling, and regulatory frameworks mirrors the core concerns of public administration in the modern era.

What makes the *Arthashastra* particularly valuable in contemporary discourse is its multidimensionality. It does not limit itself to any one discipline but instead traverses the entire spectrum of human governance—combining insights from political science, economics, law, ethics, diplomacy, and management. This interdisciplinary nature makes it ideally suited for the integrated learning models advocated by NEP 2020 and other educational reforms. It encourages learners and policymakers alike to appreciate the richness of India's intellectual traditions while applying them to current realities. As India seeks to decolonize its knowledge systems and reclaim its civilizational wisdom, texts like the *Arthashastra* serve as vital touchstones for both intellectual inquiry and practical guidance.

### Conclusion

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* stands as a monumental text within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, reflecting the intellectual richness and pragmatic wisdom of ancient India. Through its multidimensional exploration of ethics, governance, economics, law, and strategy, the treatise demonstrates how indigenous knowledge was systematically applied to build and sustain a just, prosperous, and secure society. Rooted in dharmic principles, yet remarkably realistic in its approach, the *Arthashastra* exemplifies the synthesis of moral responsibility with political and administrative acumen. In today's era of educational reform and policy innovation, the relevance of this ancient text has only grown. As India moves towards integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary learning under policies like NEP 2020, the *Arthashastra* offers a powerful indigenous framework for interdisciplinary

education, governance reform, and strategic thinking. Its enduring insights remind us that ancient wisdom, when recontextualized thoughtfully, can continue to guide modern societies toward ethical and effective leadership.

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