



The Arthashastra

Kautilya , L.N. Rangarajan (Editor, Translator)

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The Arthashastra is an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy, written in Sanskrit. It identifies its author by the names 'Kautilya' and 'Vishnugupta', both names that are traditionally identified with Chanakya (c. 350–283 BC), who was a scholar at Takshashila and the teacher and guardian of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Mauryan Empire. The text was influential until the 12th century, when it disappeared. It was rediscovered in 1904 by R. Shamasastri, who published it in 1909. The first English translation was published in 1915.

Roger Boesche describes the Arthashastra as "a book of political realism, a book analysing how the political world does work and not very often stating how it ought to work, a book that frequently discloses to a king what calculating and sometimes brutal measures he must carry out to preserve the state and the common good."

Centrally, Arthashastra argues how in an autocracy an efficient and solid economy can be managed. It discusses the ethics of economics and the duties and obligations of a king. The scope of Arthashastra is, however, far wider than statecraft, and it offers an outline of the entire legal and bureaucratic framework for administering a kingdom, with a wealth of descriptive cultural detail on topics such as mineralogy, mining and metals, agriculture, animal husbandry, medicine and the use of wildlife. The Arthashastra also focuses on issues of welfare (for instance, redistribution of wealth during a famine) and the collective ethics that hold a society together.

The Arthashastra Details

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From Reader Review The Arthashastra for online ebook

Frank O'donnell says

This work is most commonly likened to Machiavelli, although it predates 'The Prince' by several centuries. With a similar attitude to statecraft to that of Machiavelli, this offers a far more comprehensive and detailed manual for realist power aggrandisement. It also differs from Machiavelli in its genuine concern for the welfare and economic prospects of domestic citizens, where Machiavelli dismisses such issues outright and instead advises that a king merely rule through fear. I would recommend this over Machiavelli as an introduction to classical realist thought, as it offers the more complete guide to how a ruler interested in power aggrandisement should govern both domestically and externally following realist principles.

Vijay Peddada says

The complete end to end elucidation of Kautilya Arthashastra.....Best book that I read so far....

Hadrian says

For a more complete review, you'd likely be better off looking at my friend Riku's excellent remarks here. He's made the effort of writing a more comprehensive summary; I'll stick with a few brief comments.

I'm reminded of a remark that President Kennedy made when he was forming his cabinet after the election in 1960. One of his top choices waffled about the decision, saying he wasn't qualified. Kennedy deferred by saying, "There's no school for Presidents." Though that is still true, this is a book about how to be a king.

It is, as noted elsewhere, exceedingly wide in scope. The book addresses such wide topics as resource management, the formation of a civil service, espionage, and the writing of treaties. Kautilya is strict in his definitions of terms - he knows that law is a cornerstone of the state, and refuses to allow ambiguity there.

My knowledge of pre-industrial economics is lacking so I can't comment in detail about that, but I can vaguely praise his thoroughness. He does prescribe the conservation of natural resources such as forests and wild animals, which is a very astute remark for 2,300 years ago. The Romans did drive one of their more useful plant species to extinction and deforested almost the whole area around the Mediterranean, to show a negative counterexample.

Much has been made about Kautilya's harsh reputation. It is true that he does advocate extensive spying both within and outside of the king's domain, but he does not relish in it. He just includes it as something worth knowing for every ruler. Although I obviously can't comment on the details of modern intelligence methods, I was surprised by the variety of his methods. Using spies posing as religious figures and people faking disabilities? Smart stuff.

The Arthashastra's views on foreign policy (the 'Six-Fold Policy') is a clear forerunner to the modern school of 'realism', based on the premise that states act only in their own interests and how to advance their own interests. His concept of the 'silent war' is useful in that it describes states that are not openly at war, but attempt to undercut each other's interests through power plays and espionage. In any case, he views the establishment of a strong army as the foremost task of the state, as all other activities are impossible without

the power to back them up.

There's obviously a lot more to the Arthashastra than this (my copy was an abridged translation) but I was deeply impressed with what I did find. This is as thorough a manual in statecraft as can be found.

David Withun says

My video review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muZHL...>

Rohit Harip says

This book is bible/Quran/Geeta of diplomacy. what Chanakya had written 2000 years ago in this script is absolutely relevant today in every aspect of administration.

His thoughts about foreign policy, administration, economic reforms and policies are completely well articulated and relevant even today.

Indians don't need to look at any Kisinger or western thinker like Aristotle or Socrates about guidelines of polity.

Anindita, A Bohemian Mind at Work says

Found what I needed.

PTS Books Club says

Chanakya (c. 350–283 BCE) was an adviser to the first Maurya Emperor Chandragupta (c. 340–293 BCE), and was the chief architect of his rise to power. Kautilya and Vishnugupta, the names by which the ancient Indian political treatise called the Arthashastra identifies its author, are traditionally identified with Chanakya. Chanakya has been considered as the pioneer of the field of economics and political science.

In the Western world, he has been referred to as The Indian Machiavelli, although Chanakya's works predate Machiavelli's by about 1,800 years. Chanakya was a teacher in Takshashila, an ancient centre of learning, and was responsible for the creation of Maurya empire, the first of its kind on the Indian subcontinent. His works were lost near the end of the Gupta dynasty and not rediscovered until 1915.

Two books are attributed to Chanakya: Arthashastra and Neetishastra which is also known as Chanakya Niti. The Arthashastra discusses monetary and fiscal policies, welfare, international relations, and war strategies in detail. Neetishastra is a treatise on the ideal way of life, and shows Chanakya's in-depth study of the Indian way of life. Chanakya also developed Neeti-Sutras (aphorisms - pithy sentences) that tell people how they should behave. Of these well-known 455 sutras, about 216 refer to raaja-neeti (the do's and don'ts of

running a kingdom). Apparently, Chanakya used these sutras to groom Chandragupt and other selected disciples in the art of ruling a kingdom.

Arthashastra is divided into 15 books:

- 1 Concerning Discipline
 - 2 The Duties of Government Superintendents
 - 3 Concerning Law
 - 4 The Removal of Thorns
 - 5 The Conduct of Courtiers
 - 6 The Source of Sovereign States
 - 7 The End of the Six-Fold Policy
 - 8 Concerning Vices and Calamities
 - 9 The Work of an Invader
 - 10 Relating to War
 - 11 The Conduct of Corporations
 - 12 Concerning a Powerful Enemy
 - 13 Strategic Means to Capture a Fortress
 - 14 Secret Means
 - 15 The Plan of a Treatise
-

Ashok Krishna says

Arthashastra - a book that I had wanted to read ever since I read 'The Art of War' and learnt this to be a similar treatise but on political details. Gifted to me by a friend during September '10, it has taken me almost 5 years to finish reading this book.

A worthy reference material for anyone who wants to have a glimpse into how things were in the past. An exhaustive treatise of politics, diplomacy and war, this proves that the past was neither golden as we think with an assumed nostalgia, neither were the people so backward in science and technology as we perceive them to be.

Past is a mixed bag. Ideal laws, contradictory realities, preferential and protective treatment for the upper-castes, Brahmins especially, looking down upon women on every areas, government running brothels and liquor shops, kings striving to be just and ethical, cruel methods to get rid of one's enemies, pleasant ways to rule one's subjects - you will get to learn in all in this book.

Read it if you want to peek into the past through the eyes and ideals of Kautilya!

Shinde says

Exhaustive and exhausting.

If only we had someone like Chanakya/Kautilya in charge of Indian Economy now!

Riku Sayuj says

THE SCIENCE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

The Arthashastra is the most comprehensive treatise on statecraft of classical times, and perhaps of all time.

The Arthashastra is written mainly in prose but also incorporates 380 *shlokas*, which adds a vital poetic flourish to this otherwise down-to-earth classic. The text of this extraordinarily detailed manual contains fifteen books which cover numerous topics viz., the King; a complete code of law; foreign policy; secret services; civic responsibilities, and so on.

In trying to understand Kautilya's analysis, we have to keep in mind the fact that in the Kautilyan view, the king encapsulates all the constituents of a state, he has expounded the theory in terms of the king - any king. In other words, what Kautilya calls the 'interest of the king' would nowadays be termed 'National Interest'.

A Note About The Translation

This translation by Rangarajan is a good reference book if you are coming back to Arthashastra for reference, but not particularly good for a first reading. It is too well catalogued and too practical for that. The verses should be read in the order Kautilya arrayed than in this re-arranged fashion that helps to make much better sense of it, but somehow takes away the spirit.

The translation also contains a useful Index of Verses (By Textual Order) — it is meant to assist in finding out in which Part and Section a particular verse of the text has been included.

The Branches Of Knowledge

Traditionally, in classical Indian texts, the four branches of knowledge are considered to be:

- 1) Philosophy,
- 2) The Three Vedas,
- 3) Economics, and
- 4) The Science of Government

Kautilya tells us that these are, indeed, the four fundamental branches of knowledge because one can know from these four branches of study all that is to be learnt about *Dharma* [spiritual welfare] and *Artha* [material well-being]. {1.2.8-9}

Artha, literally wealth, is thus one of four supreme aims prescribed by Classical Indian tradition. However, it has a much wider significance and the material well-being of individuals is just a part of it. The 'Artha' of Arthashastra is an all-embracing word with a variety of meanings. In accordance with this, Kautilya's Arthashastra maintains that the state or government of a country has a vital role to play in maintaining the material status of both the nation and its people.

The Arthashastra is thus 'the science of politics' with a significant part dedicated to the science of economics. It is the art of government in its widest sense — the maintenance of law and order as also of an efficient administrative machinery. The subjects covered include: administration; law order and justice; taxation, revenue and expenditure; foreign policy; defense and war. Its three objectives follow one from the other: promotion of the welfare of the subjects leads to acquisition of wealth which, in turn, makes it possible to

enlarge the territory by conquest.

The Instruction Manual

The Arthashastra is essentially a treatise on the art of government and is, by nature, instructional. It seeks to instruct all kings and is meant to be useful at all times wherever *dharmā* is held to be preeminent. And because it is instructional, its basis is the practice of government. The majority of the treatise is a *Manual of Instruction* for kings and officers of the state.

There are three distinct parts in this manual:

1. The *Manual of Administration* describes the organization of the apparatus of the state and prescribes the duties and responsibilities of every key official, either for maintaining order or for collecting revenue. There are, naturally, parts devoted to budgetary control, enforcement of civil service discipline and the public's civic responsibility.
2. The *Code of Law and Justice* covers both civil and criminal law and is, basically, a Penal Code; the extensive and graded penalties and fines prescribed in it have the twin aims of deterring transgressions and collecting revenue for the state.
3. The third part is a *Manual of Foreign Policy*, the primary aim of which is acquisition of territory by conquest.

These three manuals correspond to the three objectives of the state - wealth, justice and expansion — A stable and prosperous state, which only a just administration can secure, is a prerequisite for accumulation of wealth which is then used to augment the territory.

Justice —> Wealth —> Expansion —> More Wealth, and so on...

... as long as Justice is not compromised. Which is why the prime focus of The Arthashastra is good administration that ensures the perpetuation of justice and prosperity in the kingdom.

Against Reductionist Arguments

Before we move on, we should face the unfortunate fact that both Kautilya the author and his masterwork the Arthashastra are much misunderstood. Popularly known as Chanakya, he is maligned and often ridiculed as a teacher of unethical, not to say immoral, practices and as an advocate of the theory that 'the ends justify the means.' 'Chanakyan' has entered Indian vocabulary as the equivalent of 'Machiavellian'.

Most people know little of what Kautilya actually said in the Arthashastra. The only thing they can recall is the superficial aspects of the 'mandala' theory, based on the principles: 'Every neighboring state is an enemy and the enemy's enemy is a friend.' This is, no doubt, almost always valid. Nevertheless, to reduce Kautilya's theory on foreign policy to just these two observations is to do him a grave injustice. Indeed, the theory deals with not just three states, but with a twelve. Here is a sample of how much more nuanced that simple understanding could be, with a little effort:

This popular view is not only simplistic but untrue. A through reading of the treatise is required to appreciate the range and depth of the Arthashastra. It is a pioneering work on statecraft in all its aspects, written at least one thousand five hundred years ago.

Even the condemnation of Kautilya as an unethical teacher and the equivalence established with Machiavelli (itself based on gravely erroneous conception of that great master!) is based on ignorance of his work.

Kautilya's is always a sane, moderate and balanced view. He placed great emphasis on the welfare of the people. His practical advice is rooted in dharma. But, as a teacher of practical statecraft, he advocated unethical methods in the furtherance of national interest, but always with very strict qualification. But these are often ignored or just plain unknown to the majority.

Just as Kautilya's important qualifications to his advocacy of unethical methods is often ignored, so is the voluminous evidence in the Arthashastra of his emphasis on welfare, not only of human beings but also of animals. Welfare in the Arthashastra is not just an abstract concept. It covers maintenance of social order, increasing economic activity, protection of livelihood, protection of the weaker sections of the population, prevention of harassment of the subjects, consumer protection and even welfare of slaves and prisoners.

In short, the Arthashastra is a mixture of both what we applaud today and what we consider to be reprehensible. Kautilya has a great deal to say about civic responsibility; the obligation of every householder to take precautions against fire is mentioned; so is a prohibition on cutting trees in public parks. Consumer protection and vigilance against exploitation of the people by government servants are aspects which we consider good. Equally, some of Kautilya's suggestions will be seen by us as unethical. What is essential is that we understand both aspects and use them to learn history as well as to apply to the modern situations.

The Kautilyan Conception of The State

Dr. Kangle, in his magisterial work on Kautilya, notes that *'the kind of state control over the economy Arthashastra presupposes is not possible without an efficient administration. We, therefore, find in it a description of an elaborate administrative machinery.'*

A ruler's duties in the internal administration of the country are three-fold: *raksha* or protection of the state from external aggression, *palana* or maintenance of law and order within the state, and *yogakshema* or safeguarding the welfare of the people. These duties also meant that the King needed an elaborate support system.

The highly centralized Kautilyan state was to be regulated by an elaborate and intricate system as laid out by Kautilya. While at first glance we might think that this high centralization is repulsive, we should also appreciate the difficulties of the time. Most of the empires of the world relied on tight centralization to ensure some degree of success. Also, in Kautilya's eyes, everything was in the service of one goal: Justice.

The extensive responsibilities of the state for promoting economic wellbeing and preserving law and order demand an equally extensive administrative machinery. Any text on Arthashastra thus has to contain details of the organization of the civil service as well as the duties and responsibilities of individual officials.

Thus we can see how The Arthashastra was bound to be an elaborate manual that dealt with every minute aspect of administration and daily life.

The Arthashastra is a through discussion on the science of living, along with being a valuable historical document on the conduct of administration. It is thus supremely valuable for the historian but also for a modern political scientist or sociologist or economist or administrator.

A Modern Kautilya

All this shows us how close to modern life and administration the Kautilyan ideas come. Reading ancient

books is the best way to rid ourselves of modernist fantasies — except for communication and transport, in the basic institutions, we are still where we were. and it is these two things (advance in communication & transport) that has made our institutions slightly more efficient, but also a lot more complex and thus just as bad at dealing with real things, while giving the illusion of a lot of activity.

The same thing can be said of the role of technology in daily life as well. We can get more things done because we can, but precisely because we can, there are always more things to do.

The Red Queen's laugh reverberates through our modern lives and modern states.

Reality And The Ideal

The picture of the ideal Kautilyan state that emerges from our discussion above is one of a well-run state, prosperous and bustling with activity. But if we are to comprehend clearly Kautilya's teachings and apply them judiciously to the modern world, we also have to be aware of the essential characteristics of the work. The treatise is about an ideal state - not that such a state actually ever existed or is even likely to exist now or in the future. To the extent any of the six constituent elements of a state - the ruler, the ministers, the urban and the rural population, the economic power and the military might - differ from the ideals Kautilya has set out, to that extent the advice given by him has to be modified.

I cannot imagine that much would change if a modern Kautilya were to write an Arthashastra today, except that he would have a broader, faster reach, and a better chance of enforcing things. But the basics of *what* he wants to do would not change much, nor would the *how*, only the means/instruments of effecting them would be easier. But unless those means are not available to the people, their range also increases, and hence real control would remain as difficult today as it was then.

The Illusion of Governance?

This realization should lead us to wonder why Kautilya attempted such an elaborately and minutely planned state architecture — we should consider the possibility that perhaps this level of intrusion into daily life was required, at least at the planning level, precisely because *real* control was so impossibly difficult? Maybe the Plan was needed for any semblance of governance? This reminds me strongly of Kafka's Castle administration and their reliance on the awe of the villagers. Maybe the illusion of minute micro-managed and all-pervasive governance can cover up for the inability to really govern?

Isn't it the same today?

The Best in the Market

We have seen that the Arthashastra is an exhaustive and detailed inventory of everything a state should do and everything every minor official should do. A more detailed secular constitution of governance and daily life cannot be imagined. With this legacy, it is no wonder that the much less ambitious Indian Constitution is still the longest in the world, the most detailed and most concerned with trying to micro manage the nuts and bolts of administration.

We have also seen how the problems that Kautilya tried to tackle are more or less the same as what modern states fail spectacularly at, even when aided by more gee-whiz technology. And this immutability of problems and of solutions is precisely why the level of detail that Kautilya goes into is still valuable for government officials, administrators and citizens.

A better guidebook has not hit the market yet.

chaz2b says

- 061411 Kautilya's Arthashastra ebook <http://bit.ly/joVETJ>

Paden says

Don't think I'd do justice by reviewing it. Think would recommend it to read for yourself.

Lindsay says

Amazing detail and thoroughness in this treatise on statecraft in ancient India. I took this on after being intrigued by how the circular perspective of foreign policy compared with the more typically binary views in western academia. Rather than simply a state and adversary, Kautilya's framework involves enemies and neutral/middle states as "spokes" on a "wheel," to be viewed dynamically.

Vidur Kapur says

A fascinating read. *The Arthashastra* is one of the earliest works of political realism to have been written, along with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and is perhaps the most elaborate of these. Elaborate is an apt description, given that the treatise describes all sorts of weird and wonderful ways in which seditious ministers can be identified, and enemies can be toppled and weakened. Many of these involve some quite inventive uses of spies.

For Kautilya, "the king, the minister, the country, the fort, the treasury, the army and the friend are the elements of sovereignty." Sovereign states are, in turn, self-interested actors that will invariably act to increase their relative standing: "the possession of power and happiness in a greater degree makes a king superior to another; in a lesser degree, inferior; and in an equal degree, equal. Hence a king shall always endeavor to augment his own power and elevate his happiness." (*cf.* Mearsheimer's 'offensive realism').

Who are the "friends" that Kautilya writes of? As it happens, the concept "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" originated in *The Arthashastra*:

The king who, being possessed of good character and best-fitted elements of sovereignty, is the fountain of policy, is termed the conqueror. The king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror's territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy, is termed the friend (of the conqueror)... In front of the conqueror and close to his enemy, there happen to be situated kings such as the conqueror's friend, next to him, the enemy's friend, and next to the last, the conqueror's friend's friend, and next, the enemy's friend's friend.

It is important to note here that Kautilya was describing a 'pre-Westphalian' state of affairs in India circa 300 BC. However, the complex web of alliances described by Kautilya in this Circle of States/Kings (*rajamandala*) might be said to be rather applicable to contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics! (Though, given the United States' support for militant groups in nearby Afghanistan, the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" doesn't always work out so well.)

Some also see elements of Kautilyan political strategy being deployed by the Republic of India even today; friendships with Afghanistan and Japan are cultivated, as they are seen as allies against Pakistan and China respectively. In other domains, India maintains its famed stance of 'non-alignment', in keeping with Kautilya's advocacy of "neutrality" in certain circumstances. Meanwhile, Kautilya does not advocate for the Mauryan Empire of which he was part to expand out of South Asia. Again, this is in keeping with an India which has rarely expanded beyond its frontiers (excepting the Cholas' expansion into an already Indianized Southeast Asia in the 11th Century AD).

Morality does not really enter into the equation in *The Arthashastra*, except in some rare instances, demonstrating that the preservation of the State is not an end in itself. As Kautilya writes: "in the happiness of his [the King's] subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare his welfare; whatever pleases himself he shall not consider as good, but whatever pleases his subjects he shall consider as good." All the more reason, then, for the King to carry out the business of the state, "as the root of wealth is activity, and of evil its reverse." At the end of the day, says Kautilya, "wealth and wealth alone is important, inasmuch as charity and desire depend upon wealth for their realisation."

Though, just as Kautilya recommends fair and just treatment of conquered peoples not so much out of concern for their welfare, an ulterior motive may exist when it comes to concern for the welfare of the people of the kingdom, for "the king who is well educated and disciplined in sciences, devoted to good Government of his subjects, and bent on doing good to all people *will enjoy the earth unopposed.*" [My italics]

Ultimately, the primary justification given for a strong kingdom - and the actions necessary to preserve and expand it - may stem from an ancient Indian proverb: *matsya nyaya* ("the law of the fishes", in which the big eat the small). "In the absence of governance, the strong will swallow the weak. In the presence of governance, the weak resists the strong." As Thomas Hobbes would essentially argue two millennia later, Kautilya writes that "without government, rises disorder".

Kamal Jindal says

still related to contemporary india.
