INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Kautilya: Theory of State, Statecraft and Government

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 18, 2026 • 23 min read



Kautilya (also known as **Chanakya** and **Vishnugupta**) is regarded as the greatest political realist of ancient India. Tradition holds that he was the Brahmin teacher and chief minister who helped **Chandragupta Maurya** overthrow the Nanda dynasty and found the Mauryan Empire (c. **321 BCE**). His treatise, the **Arthashastra** (“science of wealth / material gain”), is the most detailed ancient Indian work on the **state, government, economy, law, diplomacy and war**.

Where Manu (Topic 1) grounded politics in dharma and the social order, Kautilya treats politics as an **autonomous science of power** — though still within a dharmic framework. He is often compared with **Machiavelli**; the sociologist **Max Weber** remarked that compared with the Arthashastra, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is harmless.

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The Arthashastra

Rediscovery and date

- The text was lost for centuries and **rediscovered in 1905** by **R. Shamasastry** in Mysore; he published it in 1909 and an English translation in 1915. This rediscovery transformed the understanding of ancient Indian political thought, which had earlier been seen as purely religious and otherworldly.
- Its date is debated. Tradition places it in the **4th century BCE**. Scholars like **Thomas Trautmann** (stylistic analysis, 1971) argued that it had several authors; **Patrick Olivelle** (2013) dates the final redaction to **c. 50–300 CE**, while accepting older layers. **R. P. Kangle**, its leading Indian editor (1960–65), defended a Mauryan-period core.

Structure

The text has **15 books** (*adhikaranas*), **150 chapters**, **180 topics** (*prakaranas*) and about **6,000 shlokas** (mostly in prose with verses). It covers:

- Books 1–5: the king’s training, administration, law and justice, suppression of criminals (*kantakashodhana*), and secret conduct;
- Books 6–13: the circle of states, foreign policy, calamities, war, and conquest;
- Book 14: secret means (occult and poison practices);
- Book 15: methodology (*tantrayukti*) — the 32 devices of scientific exposition.

Meaning of artha and the four sciences

Kautilya defines *artha* as the **livelihood of men**, i.e. the **earth inhabited by men**; the Arthashastra is the science of acquiring and protecting the earth. He recognises four sciences (*vidyas*):

- **Anvikshiki** — philosophy and logic (Samkhya, Yoga, Lokayata);
- **Trayi** — the three Vedas (dharma and adharma);

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- **Varta** — economics (agriculture, cattle-rearing, trade);
- **Dandaniti** — the science of government and punishment.

Unlike other schools (Manu's school recognised three, Brihaspati two, Shukra one — dandaniti alone), Kautilya holds all four are necessary, but **dandaniti** is the foundation of the other three: without it, there is no security for philosophy, religion or economy.

"Material well-being alone is supreme…". In the *Arthashastra* (Book I), Kautilya says that of the three aims of life — dharma, artha and kama — artha is the most important, because dharma and kama depend on it. Artha here means wealth and also the territory and economic base of the state. A poor state cannot protect dharma or give its people a good life. This makes Kautilya a materialist and realist thinker: economics is the base of politics. Hence his detailed treatment of the treasury (*kosha*), agriculture, mines, trade and taxation. Critics say he subordinates morality to wealth; but Kautilya does not reject dharma — he sees artha as its foundation.

Dharmashastra or Nitishastra?

Kautilya's work belongs to the **Arthashastra / Nitishastra** tradition (the science of polity and wealth), not the Dharmashastra tradition, because its subject is statecraft and its approach is practical and realist. But it respects dharma and borrows some legal material from Dharmashastra.

Kautilya's Theory of State

Origin of the state

Kautilya repeats an older story: when people were oppressed by **matsyanyaya** (the strong devouring the weak), they **chose Manu Vaivasvata as their king** and agreed to pay him **one-sixth of grain** and **one-tenth of merchandise** as his share, in return for protection. Kings who receive these taxes are responsible for the security of the people.

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This is significant because it contains elements of a **social contract**: the king's authority arises from the people's choice and a **reciprocal obligation** — taxes in return for protection. Some scholars (like K. P. Jayaswal) see it as a contractual theory; others note that Kautilya uses it mainly as propaganda to be spread by spies to justify taxation, not as a theory of popular sovereignty. He also uses divine elements: the king holds the office of Indra and Yama, rewarding and punishing.

The state as a human creation. Unlike the divine theory found in Manu, Kautilya treats the state as a human institution created to end anarchy, not as a gift of the gods. The state is like a **living organism** whose parts must work together. The king is in effect a **servant of the people**: he receives taxes as wages for his service of protection and welfare, upholds law and order, and protects property rights. The end of the state is the **welfare of the people** (*yogakshema*), not the personal glory of the ruler.

Saptanga: the seven elements of the state

Kautilya's most famous contribution is the **saptanga theory** (Book 6). The state (*rajya*) consists of seven constituent elements (*prakritis*):

Element	Meaning	Ideal qualities
Swami	The king	High birth, wisdom, energy, self-control, truthfulness, gratitude, respect for elders, ability to take advice
Amatya	Ministers and officials	Native, of good family, learned, loyal, honest, skilful, tested by secret tests (*upadhas*)
Janapada	Territory and population	Fertile land, mines, forests, water, cattle, loyal and hard-working people, few enemies
Durga	Fortified city / forts	Water, mountain, desert and forest forts; well-stocked capital
Kosha	Treasury	Lawfully acquired, full of gold, silver and grain, able to withstand calamities
Danda	Army / coercive power	Hereditary, loyal, well-trained, contented Kshatriya army

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Mitra	Allies	Hereditary, constant, reliable, able to mobilise quickly

Key features of saptanga:

- It is an **organic** view: the elements are like limbs of a body, interdependent.
- They are listed in **order of importance**: a calamity to the king is more serious than one to the ministers, and so on. The king is the centre: "the king and his rule" sums up all the elements.
- It anticipates the modern elements of the state: **sovereignty** (swami), **government** (amatya), **territory and population** (janapada), plus **finance, defence and foreign relations**.
- The theory includes an analysis of **calamities** (*vyasanas*) affecting each element.

The body analogy. Indian textbooks often explain the organic character of the saptanga by comparing each element to a part of the human body:

Element	Part of the body	Why
Swami (king)	Head	Directs the whole body; holds the widest powers and must be learned and virtuous
Amatya (ministers)	Eyes	See and advise; must be wise, loyal and regularly tested
Janapada (territory and people)	Legs	The base on which the state stands; source of the economy
Durga (forts)	Arms	Defend the body
Kosha (treasury)	Mouth	Takes in the nourishment that feeds the state
Bala / danda (army)	Brain	Plans and enforces; the coercive strength of the state
Mitra (allies)	Ears	Bring news and support from outside

Further details on three elements:

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- **Durga (forts)** are of four types: *audaka* (water fort, surrounded by water), *parvata* (mountain fort), *dhanvana* (desert fort) and *vana* (forest fort). The capital itself should be a fortified city.
- **Bala / danda (army)** has six kinds of troops: *maula* (hereditary troops), *bhrita* (hired troops), *shreni* (troops of guilds or corporations), *mitra* (troops of allies), *amitra* (troops taken from the enemy) and *atavi* (forest tribes). Hereditary troops are the most reliable.
- **Mitra (allies)**: a hereditary or natural ally (*sahaja*), whose friendship comes from old ties, is preferred to an acquired one (*kritrima*), whose friendship depends on present benefits.

Kingship

- The king is the **pivot** of the state. Kautilya's ideal is the **rajarshi** — the royal sage who has conquered the six enemies (lust, anger, greed, pride, arrogance, foolhardiness), acquired learning, and lives a disciplined life.
- His famous principle: "**In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness; in their welfare his welfare. What pleases himself he shall not consider good, but whatever pleases his subjects he shall consider good**" (1.19.34).
- The king follows a strict **daily timetable**, dividing the day and night into eight parts each for administration, revenue, spies, council, war, rest and study.
- He must be **accessible** to the people; a king who makes himself inaccessible causes confusion and disaffection.
- He must protect himself from palace intrigue, poison and assassination — Kautilya gives detailed advice on the king's personal security and on dealing with princes ("princes, like crabs, devour their begetters").

"In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness…". In Book I, Kautilya says the king's good lies in the good of his people; what pleases himself is not good, but what pleases his subjects is. This is the welfare (*yogakshema*) principle: the king must protect (*raksha*) and promote prosperity (*yoga* — acquisition, *kshema* — preservation). He

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lists welfare duties: care for orphans, the old, the sick and widows; famine relief; irrigation; protection of consumers against traders' fraud. This balances the 'Machiavellian' image of Kautilya and shows him as an early theorist of the welfare state.

Law and justice

Kautilya recognises four sources ("feet") of law (Book 3): **dharma** (sacred law), **vyavahara** (evidence/transactions), **charitra** (custom) and **rajashasana** (royal edict). Each later one prevails over the earlier: in case of conflict, **royal law overrides** the others. This is a striking assertion of **state sovereignty** in law-making, unlike Manu, for whom the king only enforces dharma.

Justice was administered through two kinds of courts:

- **Dharmasthiya** — civil courts, presided over by three judges (*dharmasthas*) and three ministers, dealing with contracts, marriage, inheritance, debts, etc.;
- **Kantakashodhana** ("removal of thorns") — criminal courts under three *pradeshtris*, dealing with crimes, corrupt officials, and threats to public order.

Danda (punishment) should be **neither too harsh nor too mild**, but just: harsh punishment terrifies the people, mild punishment brings contempt, and just punishment makes people devoted to dharma and artha.

Dharmashastra and Arthashastra on state power

- **Dharmashastra (Manu)**: the state exists to uphold dharma and the varna order; the king is bound by sacred law, which comes from the Vedas and smritis; the Brahmin is the interpreter of dharma; danda is used to protect dharma. State power is limited by religious law.
- **Arthashastra (Kautilya)**: the state exists for security, prosperity and welfare; the king's edict (*rajashasana*) can prevail over other sources of law in case of conflict — Kautilya lists four sources: dharma, *vyavahara* (transactions), *charitra* (custom) and *rajashasana*, with the last being decisive. State power is broader and more secular.

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- **Common ground**: both accept monarchy, varna and danda; both see the king as protector. The difference is of emphasis: dharma versus artha, sacred law versus state law.

Statecraft and Government

Statecraft means the art and techniques of running the state and dealing with other states. Kautilya's statecraft includes: the education and discipline of the king (*vinaya*), control of the senses; the saptanga state; administration through superintendents (*adhyakshas*) of revenue, mines, trade, agriculture; the law and courts (*dharmasthiya* for civil and *kantakashodhana* for criminal matters — 'removal of thorns'); espionage; the four means (*upayas*) — *sama* (conciliation), *dana* (gifts), *bheda* (division) and *danda* (force); mandala theory and shadgunya for foreign policy; and welfare (*yogakshema*). The goal is *lokasamgraha* — the stability and prosperity of the people.

Ministers and council

- Kautilya distinguishes the inner circle of counsel (**mantrins**, three or four ministers) from the larger **council of ministers** (*mantriparishad*), whose size should depend on the state's needs (other schools suggested 12, 16 or 20).
- Ministers are to be selected after secret **tests of character** (*upadhas*): tests of **dharma** (piety), **artha** (greed), **kama** (lust) and **bhaya** (fear). Those passing all four may be chief ministers.
- **Secrecy of counsel** (*mantra*) is vital: deliberation should take place where even birds cannot overhear.

"Rulership can be successfully carried out only with the help of associates; one wheel alone does not turn". This explains why the king must appoint ministers (*amatyas*) and a council (*mantriparishad*) and listen to their advice. The state is a chariot: the king is one wheel, his ministers the other. It shows that Kautilya's monarchy is not personal despotism but rule with an administrative apparatus. He lays down qualifications for

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ministers, tests their loyalty (*upadhas* — tests of piety, wealth, lust and fear) and recommends a council of a manageable size. Modern parallel: collective responsibility and the role of the bureaucracy.

The administrative machinery

The Arthashastra describes a highly centralised, bureaucratic administration:

- **Eighteen tirthas** (high officials): including the **mantri** (chief minister), **purohita** (chief priest), **senapati** (commander-in-chief), **yuvaraja** (crown prince), **dauvarika** (chief of the palace), **samahartri** (chief collector of revenue), **sannidhatri** (treasurer), **pradeshtri** (magistrate), **nayaka** (city commander), **paura** (governor of the capital), **dandapala** (head of the army supply), **durgapala** (in charge of forts), **antapala** (warden of the frontiers), **atavika** (in charge of forest tribes), and others.
- About **thirty adhyakshas** (superintendents) of departments: treasury, mines, metals, mint, salt, gold, store-house, commerce, forest produce, armoury, weights and measures, tolls, weaving, agriculture, liquor, slaughter-houses, prostitutes, ships, cattle, horses, elephants, chariots, infantry, passports, and so on.
- **Local government**: the *janapada* was divided into units of 10, 200, 400 and 800 villages (*samgrahana, kharvatika, dronamukha, sthaniya*); villages were under a **gramika**; the **gopa** (in charge of 5–10 villages) and **sthanika** (a quarter of the janapada) kept records of land, population and livestock.
- **Corruption**: Kautilya notes that it is as impossible not to taste honey on the tongue as for an official not to taste the king’s revenue; he lists **forty ways of embezzlement** and recommends constant checks, transfers and spies.

“Of those (officers) the ways of embezzlement are forty”. In Book II, Kautilya lists forty ways in which officers can embezzle state revenue — delaying collection, showing false accounts, taking bribes, misreporting income and so on. He compares officials to fish in water: just as one cannot know when a fish drinks water, one cannot know when an officer misappropriates money; and just as one cannot help tasting honey or poison on the tip of the tongue, an officer handling revenue will taste some of it. Remedies: audit and accounts

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(the *akshapatala* or records office), rotation and transfer of officials, spies to watch officers, rewards for informers and heavy punishments. This shows Kautilya's realistic view of human nature and his concern for clean administration — relevant to modern anti-corruption mechanisms (CAG, Lokpal, vigilance).

Kautilya's remedies for corruption. Kautilya treats corruption as inevitable but dangerous: it drains the treasury, weakens the state and lowers the morale of honest officials and subjects. His remedies include:

- **Keeping the bureaucracy small** and appointing only tested officials, since every extra office is a new chance for embezzlement.
- **Frequent transfers and rotation** of officials, so that they cannot build up local networks of profit.
- **Strict audit and accounts**, with officials presenting their accounts on fixed dates.
- **Informers (*suchakas*)**: whistle-blowers who report embezzlement are rewarded with a share of the amount recovered, but are punished if the charge is false.
- **Spies** to watch officials and test their honesty.
- **Punishment of the whole chain of corruption**: not only the official who takes the money but also the one who gives the bribe and the one who holds the illegal money; fines, confiscation of property and public disgrace of offenders.

These ideas anticipate modern anti-corruption tools such as audits (CAG), vigilance bodies, the Lokpal and whistle-blower protection.

Economy and welfare

- "**All undertakings depend on the treasury**; hence the king should look to the treasury first." Kautilya favours a strong economy and a **state-regulated** one: state monopolies (mines, salt, liquor), state farms (*sita* land), control of prices, weights and measures, and trade.

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- Sources of revenue: land tax (normally one-sixth), customs, tolls, fines, mines, forests, and emergency levies (*pranaya*) in times of crisis.
- **Welfare duties**: the state must support orphans, the aged, the sick, widows and the helpless; regulate wages; protect consumers from fraudulent traders; and maintain irrigation, roads and famine relief. Some scholars call Kautilya's state a **welfare state** in an ancient sense.
- He recognised limited rights for slaves (*dasas*), including the right to property and to buy freedom, and prohibited enslaving an Arya.

Espionage

Spies (*gudhapurushas*) are the eyes of the king. Kautilya describes:

- **Stationary spies** (*samstha*): disguised as a fraudulent disciple (*kapatika*), a recluse (*udasthita*), a householder (*grihapatika*), a merchant (*vaidehaka*) and an ascetic (*tapasa*);
- **Roving spies** (*sanchara*): the *sattri* (classmate-spy), *tikshna* (fiery assassin), *rasada* (poisoner) and *bhikshuki* (wandering nun).

Spies watch ministers, officials, princes, citizens, enemies and allies, test public opinion, and carry out secret operations.

Foreign policy: the mandala theory

Kautilya's theory of inter-state relations is the most developed in ancient India.

The mandala (circle of states): the ambitious king seeking conquest is the **vijigishu**, at the centre. Around him:

- the immediate neighbour is the natural **enemy** (*ari*);
- the state beyond the enemy is a natural **friend** (*mitra*);
- beyond that, the **enemy's friend** (*arimitra*), the **friend's friend** (*mitramitra*), the **enemy's friend's friend** (*arimitramitra*);

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- behind the vijigishu: the **rear enemy** (*parshnigraha*), the **rear friend** (*akranda*), and their allies (*parshnigrahasara*, *akrandasara*);
- the **middle king** (*madhyama*), adjacent to both the vijigishu and the enemy, and stronger than either;
- the **neutral king** (*udasina*), more powerful than all, outside the circle.

This gives a circle of **twelve kings**. The principle that "**the enemy of my enemy is my friend**" is at its core — an early theory of the **balance of power** based on geography.

Seventy-two elements of sovereignty. Each of the twelve kings has five material elements of the state (amatya, janapada, durga, kosha, danda) besides the king himself, making six elements per state. Twelve kings multiplied by six elements gives **seventy-two elements of sovereignty** (or, counted another way, twelve kings plus sixty material elements). The vijigishu must weigh all of them when he calculates his own strength against others.

No permanent friends or enemies. Because friendship and enmity follow geography and interest, alliances change as power changes; a friend today may become an enemy tomorrow. This makes the mandala an early **balance-of-power** theory, close to the realist tradition in modern international relations. The choice between the four upayas and the six-fold policy depends on whether the rival is stronger, weaker or equal in strength.

Shadgunya (six-fold policy):

Policy	Meaning	When to use
Sandhi	Peace / treaty	When weaker than the enemy
Vigraha	Hostility / war	When stronger
Asana	Remaining quiet / neutrality	When equal in strength
Yana	Marching / preparing to attack	When much stronger
Samshraya	Seeking protection of another	When very weak

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Dvaidhibhava	Dual policy: peace with one, war with another	When one needs help of an ally against another

The guiding principle: **a state should choose the policy that leads to its own advancement (vriddhi) rather than decline (kshaya)**. Kautilya's realism holds that power and self-interest guide relations between states.

Four upayas: **sama** (conciliation), **dana** (gifts), **bheda** (dissension) and **danda** (force), to be used in that order where possible.

Types of war:

- **Prakasha yuddha** — open war, at an agreed time and place;
- **Kuta yuddha** — treacherous/concealed war (ambushes, surprise attacks);
- **Tushnim yuddha** — silent war: secret agents, assassinations, propaganda and subversion.

After conquest, the vijigishu should win over the people of the conquered territory by respecting their customs, festivals, gods and leaders, and by adopting their dress and language — a pragmatic approach to consolidation.

Kautilya and morality

Kautilya is often called amoral because he justifies deception, espionage, assassination and secret warfare in the interest of the state. But:

- These means are mainly recommended **against enemies and traitors**, not against loyal subjects.
- The goal is the **security and welfare** of the people (*yogakshema*: acquisition and preservation).
- The king remains bound by dharma in his personal conduct and must protect the varna order.

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Hence many scholars describe Kautilya's approach as **political realism within a dharmic framework**: politics has its own logic (raison d'état), but its ultimate end is the welfare of the people.

Kautilya's realism appears in: priority of artha; human nature seen as self-interested (forty ways of embezzlement); use of spies, secret agents and covert action; amoral foreign policy guided by the interest of the state; and flexible law with the king's edict decisive. Yet his realism is not cynical: its aim is order, welfare and protection of the people.

Kautilya and Machiavelli

Point	Kautilya	Machiavelli
Period and work	Arthashastra (c. 4th BCE core; later redaction)	*The Prince* (1513), *Discourses*
Approach	Political realism; politics as science of power and wealth	Political realism; separation of politics from Christian morality
Ends	Yogakshema — welfare and security of subjects; conquest	Stability and glory of the state; Italian unification
Means	Saptanga, mandala, shadgunya, espionage, kuta yuddha	Force and fraud (lion and fox), fear over love
Morality	Dharma still frames the king's personal life; welfare as end	Ends justify means; Christian virtue may harm the state
Scope	Comprehensive: administration, economy, law, war, diplomacy	Focus on acquiring and maintaining power

- **Similarities**: both are political realists; both give priority to the security and power of the state; both accept deceit, spies and force when needed ("reason of state"); both write advice for rulers; both separate politics from conventional or religious morality in practice. Max Weber remarked that compared with the *Arthashastra*, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is harmless.

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- **Differences**: Kautilya writes a systematic treatise covering administration, law, economy, foreign policy and welfare; Machiavelli writes a short handbook for a new prince in a divided Italy. Kautilya works within the framework of dharma and the varna order and stresses welfare (*yogakshema*) and the training of the king (*vinaya*); Machiavelli speaks of *virtù* and *fortuna* and also praises republics in the *Discourses*. Kautilya's theory of interstate relations (mandala) is far more elaborate. Kautilya's king is bound by duty; Machiavelli's prince is judged by success.
- **Conclusion**: calling Kautilya the 'Indian Machiavelli' is partly true (realism) but unfair, because Kautilya combines realism with welfare and order; some scholars say Machiavelli is the 'Italian Kautilya', since Kautilya came about eighteen centuries earlier.

Critical Assessment

Contributions:

- First **systematic, secular-oriented treatment** of politics and administration in India; politics as an independent science (*dandaniti*).
- **Saptanga** — a comprehensive organic theory of the state.
- **Mandala and shadgunya** — an early theory of international relations and the balance of power; India's strategic community still speaks of "Kautilyan" realism.
- A model of **centralised bureaucratic administration** and an interventionist, welfare-oriented economy.
- Assertion of the **supremacy of royal law** (rajashasana) and the idea of a strong, sovereign state.

Criticisms:

- Justifies **unethical means** (spies, assassination, deceit), leading to the charge of amorality.
- The state is **autocratic and paternalistic**; there is no place for popular participation or rights of citizens in the modern sense.

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- Supports the **varna order**, though more pragmatically than Manu.
- Excessive **surveillance** and control of social and economic life.
- Questions of **authorship and date** make it difficult to treat the text as a description of Mauryan reality.

What scholars say about Kautilya

- **R. Shamasastry**, who rediscovered and first translated the *Arthashastra*, presented it as proof that ancient India had a developed science of politics and administration, not only religion and philosophy.
- **K. P. Jayaswal** and **N. C. Bandyopadhyaya** stressed the social-contract elements in Kautilya's account of the origin of kingship and the reciprocal duties of king and people.
- **Max Weber** called the *Arthashastra* a work of radical political realism, beside which Machiavelli's *The Prince* is harmless.
- **R. P. Kangle**, in his critical edition and study, treated the text as essentially the work of one author belonging to the Mauryan age, against the multi-author view of **Thomas Trautmann**.
- **Roger Boesche** called Kautilya the 'first great political realist', ahead of Machiavelli and Hobbes.
- **Amartya Sen** has drawn attention to Kautilya's practical treatment of economic policy and of the state's duties towards the deprived, as part of India's long tradition of public reasoning.
- Many Indian strategic thinkers use the term 'Kautilyan' for a realist approach to foreign and security policy.

Conclusion

Kautilya's Arthashastra is the classic text of Indian statecraft. It treats the state as an organic whole of seven elements, the king as a disciplined servant of his people's welfare, law as ultimately the king's command, and international politics as a circle of rivals in which

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the wise king uses the six policies to advance his power. Its realism, administrative detail and strategic insight make it as relevant to students of international relations and public administration today as to historians of ancient India.

Quick Revision

Concept	Key point
Author	Kautilya / Chanakya / Vishnugupta; minister of Chandragupta Maurya
Rediscovery	R. Shamasastry, 1905 (published 1909; trans. 1915)
Structure	15 books, 150 chapters, 180 topics
Four vidyas	Anvikshiki, Trayi, Varta, Dandaniti
Origin of state	People chose Manu Vaivasvata; 1/6 grain, 1/10 merchandise
Saptanga	Swami, Amatya, Janapada, Durga, Kosha, Danda, Mitra
King’s ideal	Rajarshi; “In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness”
Sources of law	Dharma, Vyavahara, Charitra, Rajashasana (last prevails)
Courts	Dharmasthiya (civil), Kantakashodhana (criminal)
Mandala	12 kings; vijigishu at centre
Shadgunya	Sandhi, Vigraha, Asana, Yana, Samshraya, Dvaidhibhava
Wars	Prakasha, Kuta, Tushnim
Upadhas	Tests of dharma, artha, kama, bhaya

Memory aids

- Saptanga: **“SAJ DKDM”** — Swami, Amatya, Janapada, Durga, Kosha, Danda, Mitra.
- Law hierarchy: **D-V-C-R**, with **R (royal edict) on top**.

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Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

- Explain Kautilya’s saptanga theory of the state. How far does it anticipate the modern idea of the state?
- Discuss Kautilya’s views on kingship and the duties of the king.
- Examine Kautilya’s mandala theory and six-fold policy. How relevant are they to contemporary international relations?
- Describe the administrative system outlined in the Arthashastra.
- “Kautilya was the Machiavelli of India.” Critically examine.
- Is Kautilya’s political thought amoral? Discuss with reference to his views on ends and means.
- Compare the political ideas of Manu and Kautilya.

Short-answer questions

- Who rediscovered the Arthashastra and when?
- What are the four vidyas according to Kautilya?
- What is the contractual element in Kautilya’s theory of the origin of the state?
- What are the upadhas?
- What is the vijigishu?
- Distinguish between dharmasthiya and kantakashodhana courts.
- What are the four sources of law in the Arthashastra?
- What is tushnim yuddha?
- Name four types of stationary spies.
- What does Kautilya say about corruption among officials?

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Multiple-choice questions

- **The Arthashastra was rediscovered by:** (a) R. P. Kangle (b) R. Shamasastry (c) K. P. Jayaswal (d) U. N. Ghoshal. *Answer: (b)*
- **Which is NOT one of Kautilya's seven elements of the state?** (a) Durga (b) Kosha (c) Purohita (d) Mitra. *Answer: (c)*
- **In Kautilya's mandala, the ambitious king at the centre is called:** (a) Madhyama (b) Udasina (c) Vijigishu (d) Parshnigraha. *Answer: (c)*
- **According to Kautilya, in case of conflict among the sources of law, which prevails?** (a) Dharma (b) Vyavahara (c) Charitra (d) Rajashasana. *Answer: (d)*
- **Dvaidhibhava means:** (a) Neutrality (b) Dual policy (c) Seeking shelter (d) Marching. *Answer: (b)*
- **Match the following:** (A) Anvikshiki – (B) Trayi – (C) Varta – (D) Dandaniti. (1) Economics (2) Philosophy (3) Science of government (4) Vedas. Correct code: (a) A-2, B-4, C-1, D-3 (b) A-4, B-2, C-1, D-3 (c) A-2, B-1, C-4, D-3 (d) A-3, B-4, C-1, D-2. *Answer: (a)*
- **"Compared to it, Machiavelli's Prince is harmless" was said of the Arthashastra by:** (a) Max Weber (b) Hegel (c) Marx (d) Toynbee. *Answer: (a)*
- **Assertion (A):** Kautilya's theory of the origin of the state has contractual elements. **Reason (R):** People chose Manu as king and agreed to pay him a share of grain and merchandise. (a) Both true, R explains A (b) Both true, R does not explain A (c) A true, R false (d) A false, R true. *Answer: (a)*
- **The tests of ministers' character in the Arthashastra are called:** (a) Upayas (b) Upadhas (c) Vyasanas (d) Tirthas. *Answer: (b)*
- **Silent war in Kautilya's terminology is:** (a) Prakasha yuddha (b) Kuta yuddha (c) Tushnim yuddha (d) Dharma yuddha. *Answer: (c)*

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Previous Years' Questions

These are questions actually set in earlier examinations. UPSC questions are from the Civil Services Mains, PSIR Optional, Paper I; the year is given in brackets. Kautilya is one of the most frequently examined Indian thinkers in UPSC.

UPSC Civil Services Mains (PSIR)

- Comment: "Material well-being alone is supreme. For, spiritual good and sensual pleasures depend upon material well-being." (Kautilya) (1993)
- Comment: "Rulership can be successfully carried out (only) with the help of associates: one wheel alone does not turn." (Kautilya) (1994)
- Comment: Mandal theory. (2003)
- Comment: "Of those (officers) the ways of embezzlement are forty." (Kautilya) (2005)
- Comment: "In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness; in their welfare his welfare." (Kautilya) (2007)
- Critically examine the 'Sapta Prakriti' of state as envisaged by Kautilya. (2007)
- Compare and contrast Kautilya and Machiavelli on statecraft. (2009; asked again in 2015)
- Compare and contrast Dharmashastra and Arthashastra with reference to State power. (2010)
- Analyse, as per Kautilya, the Saptanga theory of the state. (2013)
- What do you understand by the notion of Statecraft? Discuss the theory of statecraft as given by Kautilya. (2017)
- Discuss Kautilya's views on the elements of the State. (2019)
- Analyze Kautilya's Saptanga theory. How do you explain its significance in present-day politics? (2026)

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University examinations

- Under which category shall we put Kautilya's work — Dharmashastra or Nitishastra? (B.A. Part I, Indian Political Thought, 2-mark question)
- Discuss Kautilya's Saptanga theory of state. How does it reflect the pragmatic realism of ancient Indian political thought? (B.A. Semester III, Ancient and Medieval Indian Political Thought)
- Explain Kautilya's concept of statecraft. (B.A. Semester V, Indian Political Thought, 2025)

Answer pointers: Saptanga theory and its present-day significance (UPSC 2026)

- Define the seven elements in order of importance: *swami* (king), *amatya* (ministers), *janapada* (territory and people), *durga* (fort), *kosha* (treasury), *danda* (army and coercive power), *mitra* (ally); the state as an organic whole.
- Explain the organic analogy: each organ depends on the others; a defect in a higher element is more serious (Kautilya's ranking).
- Compare with the modern elements of the state (population, territory, government, sovereignty): Kautilya adds treasury, army and allies, which is closer to a theory of state capacity.
- Present-day relevance: leadership and bureaucracy (*swami*, *amatya*), fiscal capacity (*kosha*), internal and external security (*danda*, *durga*), strategic partnerships (*mitra*) in India's foreign policy; *yogakshema* as a welfare-state idea.
- Limits: monarchical, centralised, uses espionage and deceit; but realism and welfare together make it relevant. Mention the Kautilya–Machiavelli comparison briefly.

Suggested Readings

- R. P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthasastra*, 3 vols. (University of Bombay, 1960–65; Motilal Banarsidass).
- L. N. Rangarajan (ed. and trans.), *Kautilya: The Arthashastra* (Penguin, 1992).

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- Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kauṭilya's Arthasastra* (OUP, 2013).
- Thomas R. Trautmann, *Kautilya and the Arthasastra* (Brill, 1971).
- U. N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas* (OUP, 1959).
- Roger Boesche, *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra* (Lexington, 2002).
- Himanshu Roy and M. P. Singh (eds.), *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers* (Pearson, 2017).
- R. Shamasastry (trans.), *Kautilya's Arthasastra* (Bangalore, 1915).
- N. C. Bandyopadhyaya, *Kautilya, or An Exposition of His Social Ideal and Political Theory* (Calcutta, 1927).
- T. N. Ramaswamy, *Essentials of Indian Statecraft: Kautilya's Arthasastra for Contemporary Readers* (Asia Publishing House, 1962).

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