

Arthashastra of Kautilya: A Textual Survey

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Abstract

Arthashastras were ancient genre of Sanskrit texts pertaining to state administration, and were primarily product of the kshatriya traditions. Artha or wealth is the subject matter of all Arthashastras. It has been argued that since the Vedic period, a large number of aphoristic or sutra-formatted and prose styled Arthashastras were produced in ancient India, but a major portion of them have become either extant today or available only in fragments. Even among the survived texts, many are incomplete or ending abruptly, giving space for the readers to surmise their purport, or to read meanings into them the way they wished. This is also true with regard to one of the famous Arthashastras conjectured to be written by Kautilya. This survived text of Arthashastra roughly deals with one hundred eighty subjects- from elements of sovereignty to international theory of rajmandala, and from legal apparatus to science and morality. Like Dharmashastras, Kautilya's Arthashastra is concerned more with what ought to be done rather than reflecting on the actual state of affairs. It is more like the political guide and manual on state-craft or governance. However, it is quite difficult to establish the historicity of the text or the author; or to claim if he was historical person, as no authentic historical testimonies are available to prove such exercises.

Key Words: Takshashila, chaturvargas, Dandaniti, danda, Nitisara, adhikaranas, dharma, artha, kama, moksha, Maurya, Dharmashastras, Chandragupta, Sanskrit, Vishnugupta, Chanakya.

*Arthashastra (science of polity)¹ is one of the most influential and nonpareil ancient Indian Sanskrit texts on the principles of statecraft, economic plans and military artifice. There is no other name in the history of ancient Indian political thought which commands as much popularity and respect as that of the author of Arthashastra.² Though, the popular version of it is traditionally ascribed to Kautilya, who was also called variously as Kautalya³, Vishnugupta⁴, and Chanakya⁵- a Takshashila⁶ or Taxila scholar, and ostensibly the teacher and mentor of emperor Chandragupta Maurya, the works of several other ancient authors were also entitled as Arthashastra, for instance, Brihaspatya Arthashastra, the Arthashastra of Usanas, the Arthashastra of Pisuna or Narada, which is also called Naradiya-Arthashastra etc. (most of these texts are non-extant today in their complete form, and found only in fragments). Perhaps, in ancient Indian Sanskrit literature, the word Arthashastra could be understood in two senses: first, in the general sense of economic policy or sutras, and second, Kautilya's Arthashastra. Probably, in the former sense, the term Arthashastra appears in the various texts anterior to Kautilya, for instance, the 'Arthashastra is the Upaveda of Rigveda' is held in the text ascribed to sage Shaunaka; it is stated as important branch of knowledge in the forty-ninth Parishishta of the Atharvaveda; Kamasutra of saint Vatsyayana refers to Brihaspati as the author and compiler of an Arthashastra (economic sutras); Sanskrit scholar, Bhasa, in his Pratima Nataka, mentions Barhaspatya Arthashastra as text portraying economic aphorisms. The word also appears in Yajnavalkya Smriti, Narada Smriti, Mahabharata, Dharmashastra and Buddhist writings. Thus, it is clear that the word Arthashastra claims a great antiquity in the history of Sanskrit literature and was in usage as distinctive economic description and as policy or sutra from very early times. In his English translation of Brihaspati Sutra, A F.W. Thomas states,

“in his well-known Arthashastra, Kautilya (not later than 3rd century BC) says that a literature bearing this title was extant in his days, and that he compiled his treatise after seeing the works of his predecessors”.⁷ However, many scholars have opined that the present available text is certainly not the work of Kautilya, though ‘it contains genuine Mauryan reminiscences’ and serve as rich source of information on the Mauryan empire.⁸ Certainly, the Arthashastra of Kautilya, though, posterior to several of the texts carried in the same name, is the most quoted treatise in the subsequent Sanskrit writings on state administration.

The Arthashastra, as the name denotes, is a text on ‘artha’ which, according to R.P. Kangle, “is the sustenance or livelihood of men, and Arthashastra is the science of the means to artha”.⁹ It is a science, describing the means of acquiring and protecting the earth. It is regarded as one of the chaturvargas (other three being dharma, kama and moksha), or the four goals of human life. Roger Boesche defined the word as ‘science of political economy’ and ‘science of politics’;¹⁰ A.L. Basham calls it ‘treatise on polity’¹¹; D.D. Kosambi translated it as ‘science of material gain’¹²; Heinrich Zimmer referred it as ‘timeless laws of politics, economy, diplomacy, and war’¹³; and Patrick Olivelle as ‘science of politics’¹⁴ The text is also considered as synonymous with Dandaniti and Nitisara.

Text of Arthashastra

The Arthashastra text contains fifteen adhikaranas or books, one-hundred fifty chapters, describing nearly one-hundred eighty different subjects (topics) and close to six thousand shlokas or prose sentences. The text deals with a wide range of subjects such as: state, the nature of government, the duties and obligations of a king, advises to the king to address and tackle the natural calamities such as draught, famine, epidemic etc., taxation, the issues of social welfare, the collective ethics that hold a society together, law, civil and criminal court systems, theories of war, nature of peace, forming alliances, diplomacy, foreign policy, financial policies, markets, commerce, and trade, agriculture, security of the king and other key administrative officers, government departments, intelligence inputs about the enemy states etc. Of the total available fifteen adhikaranas, the first five discuss the techniques of internal administration of the state; the next eight deal with state’s relations with neighbouring states; and the last two are miscellaneous sections. All the chapters are primarily written in Sanskrit prose style, but at the end each chapter uses a poetic verse; such transition from prose to poetic meter implies that the current chapter or section and its topic of discussion is ending. All the one-hundred eighty topics are numbered consecutively; after finishing the previous chapter, the following new chapter does not use the starting number but the next number of the previous chapter’s last number, signaling that all topics are interconnected and mutually related. Excluding its contents-table (the first chapter of the first book) and the last epilogue-styled adhikarana (the last chapter of the last book with 73 verse), the text consists a total of about 5,300 sentences; of which the biggest second book has 1,285 sentences, and the smallest eleventh contains 56 sentences. Though, the early writers of major Hindu texts favoured using certain specific numbers in their books (Mahabharata, for instance), it is doubtful whether the division of the Arthashastra into 15, 150 and 180 of books was intentional or accidental.

All the chapters and their contents are systematically structured: the first 21 chapters (1-18 topics) discuss the subject of training of the prince; 22-57 (36 chapters, 19-56 topics) portray the activities of superintendents; 58-77 (20 chapters 57-75 topics) justices; 78-90 (13 chapters, 76-88 topics) eradication of thorns; 91-96 (6 chapters, 89-95 topics) on secret conduct; 97-98 (2 chapters, 96-97 topics) basis of the circle; 99-116 (18 chapters, 98-126

topics) the six-fold strategy; 117-121 (5 chapters, 127-134 topics) subject of calamities; 122-128 (7 chapters, 135-146 topics) activity of a king preparing to march into battle; 129-134 (6 chapters, 147-159 topics) issue of war; 135 (1 chapter, 160-161 topics) conduct toward confederacies; 136-140 (5 chapters, 162-170 topics) weak king; 141-145 (5 chapters, 171-176 topics) means of capturing a fort; 146-149 (4 chapters, 177-179 topics) on esoteric practices; and 150 (1 chapter, 180 topic) organization of a scientific treatise.

Author and Date

Different opinions have been expressed in historical writings with regard to the actual date and authorship of the Arthashastra; on the basis of the thematical design of the text, it has generally been argued that Kautilya must have lived sometimes between 2nd century BC and 2nd century AD. Besides, the rhetorical pattern and stylistic differences within some sections and chapters of the survived manuscript of Arthashastra mandated some scholars to argue that the work should have borrowed heavily from the Arthashastra of the various authors existed prior to the composition of the present text; or the extant text includes the central arguments of the several texts known in the same name and title.¹⁵ Some historians argued that Kautilya's Arthashastra was written at the time of the foundation of the Maurya dynasty;¹⁶ some opined that "the extant Arthashastra is the prose expansion of an earlier verse original", and "the tractate was composed not only after Panini but also after Katyayana that is, after the 3rd century BC".¹⁷ Dieter Schlingloff argued that the text was written around 4th century AD.¹⁸ The western scholars and European Sanskritists such as Jolly, Keith and Winternitz etc. have argued that the work must be dated well after the Christian era. A date somewhere between the 3-4th century AC represents the general consensus of this school of writers.

But there are scholars who rejected the Arthashastra as a historical text and Kautilya as historical person to establish that neither Kautilya nor Chanakya were real historical figures; they were, in fact, imaginary-fictitious characters. Jolly, Keith and Winternitz, for instance, hold that the extant Arthashastra is not the work of the Maurya minister. They questioned the very existence of a person called Kautilya and "hold his name as a symbol of political strategy and treachery. The fact that Kautilya's name is not referred to by Patanjali in his Mahabaasya is taken as further strengthening their view. Jolly even went to the extent of asserting that Arthashastra is a piece of literary forgery and that it must be the work of a pandit given pedantic classifications and definition rather than that of a practical statesman of the stature of Chandragupta's minister".¹⁹ E. H. Johnston suggested that Kautilya or Vishnugupta may have authored a text of Arthashastra but they were different persons from the minister of Chandragupta Maurya.²⁰ While refuting the view that Canaka was the name of a region in Punjab, and hence, Chanakya refers to the birthplace, Trautmann pointed out that Chanakya and Kautilya were two different Gotra-names, and "we are dealing with two distinct persons- the minister of Chandragupta called Chanakya and Kautilya the author of the text Arthashastra. While in his character as author of an Arthashastra he is generally referred to by his gotra name, Kautilya".²¹

Most of the Indian authors and translators argued that the existing text was certainly the work of Kautilya, the minister in the court of Chandragupta Maurya, and was produced prior to the beginning of Christian era. While P.V. Kane proposed the date of the Arthashastra roughly at 2nd century BC, R.P. Kangle stated "there is no convincing reason why this work should not be regarded as the work of Kautilya, who helped Chandragupta to come to power in Magadha".²² D. R. Bhandarkar submitted that Vishnugupta was the name 'given at the naming

ceremony of the author, and hence the birth name, and Kautilya and Chanakya are connected with the gotra or lineage and birth-place respectively'.²³ On the other hand, L.N. emphatically states, "Those who question the ascription of the 4th century B.C. as the date of the work place it not later than 150 A.D. Establishing a convincing date is, no doubt, important to scholars. However, Kautilya's greatness is in no way diminished if we choose any date between 1850 and 2300 years ago".²⁴

The historical documents also establish that the Arthashastra was an authoritative reference text until the 12th century, but gradually lost its influential status owing to the current political and literary changes.²⁵ It was rediscovered in 1905 by R. Shamashastry, a librarian and Sanskrit pandit of the Mysore Oriental Library, when he received a palm leaved Sanskrit copy of the Arthashastra from a Thanjavur (formerly Tanjore) Tamil Brahmin. Between 1905 and 1909, he took keen interest in publishing and familiarizing the text to the literary world, but its English version appeared only in 1915. The English translation was first published serially in two of the then reputed journals- Indian Antiquary and Mysore Review. Later, several translations and metaphrases of the text came up; in 1924, its Malayalam manuscript stored in the Bavarian State Library was translated into English by Julius Jolly and Richard Schmidt; a Devanagari manuscript found in a library in Patan (a district situated in the northern side of Gujarat State) was brought out by Muni Jina Vijay in 1959; and R.P. Kangle translated edition was published in 1960.

Arthashastra: An Understanding

Among the four goals of human life- dharma, artha, kama and moksha- dharma is the foundation and the moksha, the ultimate goal; artha and kama are the means. That is to say, a person who founds his life on dharma, and enjoys artha and kama congruous with the precepts of dharma, certainly attains the final goal of life. Therefore, artha and kama are not to be considered as detrimental to spiritual sadhana but accordant with it. Dharmashastra and Kamashastra, the two major texts preceding Kautilya, prioritized dharma and kama respectively as the supreme goals amongst the other life goals to attain moksha; the latter being the core of central philosophical texts produced in ancient India. A few of his statements indicate that Kautilya too composed Arthashastra with the similar intention of prioritizing artha as the goal. To quote, for instance, "artha-eva pradhanah artha-mulau dharma-kamau- i.e., wealth, and wealth alone, is important, inasmuch as charity and desire depend upon wealth for their realization";²⁶ "wealth, virtue, and enjoyment form the aggregate of the three kinds of wealth. Of these, it is better to secure that which is mentioned first than that which is subsequently mentioned in the order of enumeration".²⁷ But, at other places of the text, he reserves more space for describing their mutual relations, and for the argument that moksha, in its complete sense, cannot be attained through any single means.

The term artha may also be used in two senses- earthly and spiritual. In earthly meaning, it may be used to imply material well-being, wealth, or profit, "manusyanam vrttirarthah manusyavati bhumirityarthah tasyah prithivya labha-palanopayah sastramarthasastramiti- i.e., the subsistence of mankind is termed artha, wealth; the earth which contains mankind is also termed artha, wealth; that science which treats of the means of acquiring and maintaining the earth is the Arthashastra, science of polity";²⁸ in spiritual sense, it can be an instrument of dharmasadhana, spiritual attainment. For Kautilya, dharma can be achieved or realized through material wellbeing, and both dharma and kama or desire depend on the accumulation of artha. He states, "when a king attains success by only one means among these various means, he is called one of single success; when by two, one of double

success; when by three, one of treble success; and when by four, one of fourfold success. As virtue (dharma) is the basis of wealth (artha) and as enjoyment (kama) is the end of wealth, success in achieving that kind of wealth which promotes virtue, wealth and enjoyment is termed success in all (sarvarthasiddhi)".²⁹ If Dharmashastras understand dharma the sole means for accomplishing the goal of moksha, the Arthashastra makes artha interdependent with dharma and kama, leading to moksha. In it, dharma and artha are complementary to each other, not competing elements; dharma is not reduced to the secondary position, or made subservient to artha, as the Dharmashastras did with regard to other elements, i.e., artha or kama to prioritizing dharma.

For Kautilya, dharma is indeed the foundation of state, "hence, the king shall never allow people to swerve from their duties (dharma); for whoever upholds his own duty, ever adhering to the customs of the Aryan, and following the rules of caste, and divisions of religious life, will surely be happy both here and hereafter. For the world, when maintained in accordance with injunctions of the triple Vedas, will surely progress, but never perish,"³⁰ and a king who works for the benefit of his subjects would never deviate from dharma and "faithfully follows the precepts of the sastras (dharma) becomes invincible and attains success though unaided with weapons".³¹ In other words, if the edicts of the king guarantees security of life and welfare of the people, formation of good law itself depends upon the discipline (dharma, ethical) or the humble behaviour of the king. He states, "danda, punishment (rule of law), which alone can procure safety and security of life is, in its turn, dependent on discipline (vinaya)",³² the behaviour determined by the dharma.

It may be noted here that the Arthashastra was basically written to portray how a powerful kingdom, headed by an unchallenged king, could be established on this earth, and how king could skillfully and cleverly or insidiously carry out state administration without yielding to the orders of none. King is the ultimate source of law though the sources of law include: Dharma, Vyavahara, Samstha, and Rajashasana. While dealing with lawsuits, in case of conflicts arise between the laws proposed by the canonical works and the current law, then, the king, Kautilya says, should resolve the case in accordance with the canons by ignoring the current laws. In the event of conflict between the canon laws and rajashasana or reasoning, the latter would be considered as an authority, the laws of the canonical texts would lose the ascendancy over 'rajashasana', or more clearly, the king should himself decide the dispute and his interpretation would be considered as final. In settling other cases, Kautilya says, the king would take into cognition the assertions and claims of the traditional usages, caste laws and village practices. However, the king should desist from recognizing such customs which are harmful to the interest of the state, the ruler or contrary to the principles of dharma. King is sovereign and chief element of the state. He is to take the final decision on all matters of state administration- domestic or international issues; he is the power-center in formulating internal policies and external strategies including war plans.

This unrestrained and overwhelming power that Kautilya assigned on to the king resulted in branding Chanakya a champion of radicalism and authoritarianism in subsequent works, and such opinions are expressed both in Indian and western literatures. A couple of years later to its English translation of the newly discovered Arthashastra by R. Shamashastry, scholar Max Weber, for instance, explicitly stated, "A really radical 'Machiavellianism', in the popular sense of this word, is classically represented in Indian literature, in the Kautilya Arthashastra (long before Christ, allegedly dating from Chandragupta's time). In contrast with this document Machiavelli's Principe is harmless".³³ But Weber's claims were rejected, in no unclear terms, in their

interpretations of Arthashastra by scholars such as Roger Boesche, Shounak Seth, etc. They argued that human concerns and concerns for children, women and animal life found in Kautilya in such statements as ‘the king shall also provide subsistence to helpless women when they are carrying and also to the children, they give birth to’, ‘the ultimate source of the prosperity of the kingdom is its security and prosperity of its people’ etc. could not be perceived in Machiavellian kind of works.³⁴

Footnote and Reference

¹ Originally composed in Sanskrit on palm leaves, the text has, completely covering in all the fifteen adhyakshanas with as many as one hundred fifty chapters and one hundred eighty subjects, been translated into as many as thirty Indian and world languages so far, and it is believed that the work was made available for the general readers for the first time in the printed format between 1905-1915. Though, the text is said to have been composed sometimes between 2nd century BC and 2nd century AC, the text is least referred and quoted in the colonial writings probably due to its non-availability (it has been opined that Niccolo Machiavelli’s political treatise- The Prince- which was written in 1513, was primarily patterned on Kautilya’s Arthashastra). After having been consigned to obscurity for many centuries, it was first translated into English by Rudrapatna Shamashastry. R. Shamashastry (trans) (1915), Kautilya’s Arthashastra, Bangalore: Government Press; R.P. Kangle. (1965), Kautilya Arthashastra, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; P.V. Kane (1926), The Arthashastra of Kautilya, Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute; L.N. Rangarajan (1992), Kautilya: The Arthashastra, New Delhi: Penguin Classics.

² T. Ganapathy Shastri (2002), Kautilya’s Arthashastra, Rastriya Sanskrita Samsthana, New Delhi: Bharatiya Vidhya Prakashana.

³ Etymologically Kautilya means ‘one who is crooked or perverted’- ‘kutilamatihi kautilya or kutilabuddihi kautilya’. It has also the meanings such as malicious, vile, mischievous, dishonest, fraudulent, hateful, etc. Therefore, T. Ganapati Shastri of the Trivandrum manuscripts Library argues that “Kautilya is certainly a misnomer”. He prefers the name Kautalya to Kautilya as it implies the name of the ancient sage called Vatsyayana. While rejecting this argument, Shamashastry states that Kautilya is the correct name of the author of the known text, Arthashastra as the former denotes the name of a gotra or lineage and hence, no negative meaning.

⁴ Literally, Vishnugupta means ‘one who is protected by Vishnu’. A few texts state that it was the birth name of the author of the Arthashastra; for instance, Sanskrit poet Dandi, in his book Dashakumaracharita, argues that Vishnugupta was the original name of the composer of the text Arthashastra. Similarly, Nitisara of Kamandaka holds the similar view. However, a few other writings hold the opinion that Kautilya had belonged to Jaina faith, and hence, he was called Vishnugupta.

⁵ Sanskrit word Chanakya implies, ‘chanakamatihi chanakya’ means shrewd, intelligent, sharp-witted, astute, clever, etc. The other meaning is that, canaka is the name of a region in Punjab, and since Chanakya was born and brought in that region, he was called in that name. Thus, the author of Arthashastra is popularly known as Chanakya on account of his having been a native of the canaka region. Ganapati Shastri, p. 4. Legendary accounts maintain that since he was born at canaka in the Punjab he was called Chanakya. M.V. Krishna Rao (1979), Studies in Kautilya, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, p. 2.

⁶ Takshashila (etymological meaning is ‘city of cut stone’ or ‘rock of taksha), is an archaeological site in the modern city of the same name in Punjab, Pakistan. It was considered to be the capital city of ancient Gandhara- the centre of ancient Indo-Aryan civilization and centre of education. Historical accounts state that Taxila University is one of the oldest known universities in the world and was the chief learning centre in ancient India. See, R K. Mookerji (1989), Ancient Indian education: Brahmanical and Buddhist New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 478-9; B. Muniapan and Junaid M. Shaikh (2007), World Review of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development 3 (1).

⁷ A F.W. Thomas (1921), Brihaspati Sutra or The Science of Politics according to the School of Brihaspati, Lahore (India): The Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot (The Punjab Sanskrit Series, No. One, pp. 1-2.

⁸ For instance, A.L. Basham (1954), The Wonder that was India, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, p. 52.

⁹ R.P. Kangle (1969), Arthashastra, Part 3, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, Reprinted in 2010, pp. 1-2.

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- ¹¹ *The Wonder that was India*, p. 51.
- ¹² D.D. Kosambi (1982), *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, p. 14.
- ¹³ Heinrich Zimmer (1967), *Philosophies of India*, N.J. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 36.
- ¹⁴ Patrick Olivelle (2013), *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya’s Arthashastra*, UK: Oxford University Press.
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- ¹⁸ D. Schlingloff (2012), *Fortified Cities of Ancient India*, Anthem Press.
- ¹⁹ P.V. Kane (1926), “The Arthashastra of Kautilya”, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, pp. 85-100; Ganapati Shastri, pp. 7-8.
- ²⁰ T. Burrow (1968), “Canakya and Kautilya”, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*: 17-31, Vol. 48/49, Golden Jubilee Volume 1917-1967, pp. 17-31.
- ²¹ T.R. Trautmann (1971), *Kautilya and the Arthashastra: A Statistical Investigation of the Authorship and Evolution of the Text*, Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- ²² R.P. Kangle, p.106.
- ²³ D.R. Bhandarkar, p. 69.
- ²⁴ L.N. Rangarajan, p. 22.
- ²⁵ V. Rao & S. Subrahmanyam, pp. 164-5. “The confident initial assertion that the text’s author was ‘the famous Brahman Kautilya, also named Vishnugupta, and known from other sources by the patronymic Chanakya’, and that the text was written at the time of the foundation of the Maurya dynasty, has of course been considerably eroded over the course of the twentieth century”.
- ²⁶ R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 1, chapter 7 p. 12.
- ²⁷ R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 9, chapter 7 p. 388.
- ²⁸ R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 15, chapter 1 p. 459.
- ²⁹ R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 9, chapter 7, p. 389.
- ³⁰ R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 1, chapter 3, p. 7.
- ³¹ R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 1, chapter 9, p. 15.
- ³² R. Shamashastry, *Arthashastra*, book 1, chapter 5, p. 9.
- ³³ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (1946), (reprinted from Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 44.
- ³⁴ Roger Boesche (2002), *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra*, Lanham: Lexington Books pp. 18-19; Shounak Seth (2015), *Ancient Wisdom for the Modern World: Revisiting Kautilya and his Arthashastra in the Third Millennium*, *Strategic Analysis*, Volume 39, Issue 6, pp. 710-14; A Kumar (2005), *The Structure and Principles of Public Organization in Kautilya's Arthashastra*, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 66, No. 3, pp. 463-88.