

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED QUARTERLY INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0302-9298

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 35, No. 3 (July-September), 2026]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/CSS.2026.09.30.196>

Between Danda and Dharma: The Indian Knowledge System and the Long Conversation on Statecraft from Kautilya to the Early Modern Courts

Akansha¹ & Monica Madhola Nandi²

^{1,2}Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi-110054 (India)
E-mail:<akanshachandra@ip.du.ac.in; monicanandi@ip.du.ac.in>

Abstract

Scholarship on the history of political thought has long treated systematic reflection on power as a Graeco-Roman inheritance transmitted through Renaissance Europe, a framing that marginalizes the Indian subcontinent's substantial and continuous engagement with the theory and practice of rule. This article addresses that gap by reconstructing the intellectual history of statecraft within the Indian Knowledge System from the late centuries BCE to the early modern period. Drawing on critical editions and scholarly translations of Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, Tamil and Telugu sources, and on the secondary literature that has accumulated since the recovery of Kautilya's Arthashastra in 1905, it examines four interrelated domains: the conceptual vocabulary of arthashastra, dandaniti, rajadharma and niti; competing theories of the origin of political authority, encompassing coercive, contractual and electoral accounts; the analytical apparatus of the Arthashastra, particularly the seven constituents of the state and the mandala theory of interstate relations; and the subsequent diversification of political thought across Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jain, Indo-Persian and vernacular traditions. Three findings emerge. First, the Indian tradition articulated a coherent theory of political obligation grounded in the state's function of preventing predation among unequals. Second, the apparent opposition between realist and dharmic conceptions of kingship reflects a historical process of textual redaction rather than an enduring civilisational dichotomy. Third, medieval Indo-Persian and vernacular writing sustained, rather than displaced, the recognition that governance requires a distinct form of knowledge. The article argues that the tradition's significance lies in its unresolved contestation over the reconciliation of effective rule with justice, and that its scholarly recovery requires philological rigour rather than commemorative endorsement.

Keywords

Indian knowledge system, Statecraft, Kautilya, Indian political thought.

Research Foundation International, New Delhi
(Affiliated to UNO)

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)
Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

Between Danda and Dharma: The Indian Knowledge System and the Long Conversation on Statecraft from Kautilya to the Early Modern Courts

1. Introduction

There is an old habit, still alive in some seminar rooms, of speaking about political thought as though it were born in Athens and came of age in Florence. In that telling, India appears as a land of metaphysicians and renouncers, rich in philosophy of the soul and poor in philosophy of power. The habit deserves to be confronted at the outset, because the historical record does not support it. Few civilisations argued as long, as candidly, or in as much practical detail about how a ruler should acquire, hold and use power as the Indian subcontinent did between the last centuries before the Common Era and the eighteenth century. When Max Weber read the *Arthashastra*, he came away convinced that, beside it, Machiavelli's Prince looked harmless (Weber, 1946: 124). The remark tells us as much about European assumptions as about the Indian text, but it captures the shock of recognition that has accompanied the modern rediscovery of Indian statecraft.

The renewed interest in these traditions today is bound up with the wider project of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The National Education Policy 2020 committed Indian higher education to integrating indigenous knowledge traditions into its curricula (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). A new generation of textbooks has tried to present IKS as a structured body of knowledge with its own epistemology and ontology rather than as a cabinet of antiquarian curiosities (Kapoor & Singh, 2005; Mahadevan *et al.*, 2022). Statecraft, known in the sources variously as *Arthashastra*, *dandaniti*, *rajadharma* and *niti*, sits both awkwardly and centrally within that project. It is awkward because it contradicts the romantic image of an otherworldly India. It is central because it is perhaps the clearest proof that Indian thinkers produced systematic, empirically grounded knowledge about society and government.

2. Objectives of the Study

This article explores how ancient and medieval Indian thinkers conceived of the state, what problems they believed statecraft existed to solve, and how modern scholarship has read, misread and re-read them. It moves from the vocabulary of the tradition and its theories of political origin, through Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the *dharmashastra* literature, to Buddhist, Jain and Tamil voices, then to the post-Kautilyan *niti* texts. Then to the

Indo-Persian and vernacular political thought of the Sultanate, Mughal and Vijayanagara empires. This study focuses on respect for the sophistication of these traditions and a refusal to flatten them into a single timeless 'Indian view' of politics. As Bhikhu Parekh (1986) reminded us long ago, the Hindu tradition possessed political thought of genuine depth, even if it did not develop the free-standing political philosophy that the Greeks built around the *polis*.

3. Methodology

This study is a work of interpretive intellectual history, resting on the close reading of primary texts alongside a critical survey of the scholarship that has grown around them. The primary sources are consulted in established scholarly translations, chief among them Kangle's and Olivelle's renderings of the *Arthashastra*, Olivelle's *Law Code of Manu*, Fitzgerald's *Shantiparvan*, Collins's annotated *Aggañña Sutta*, Habib and Khan's *Barani*, Blochmann's *Ain-i Akbari* and Pope's *Tirukkural*. Classical works are cited by their canonical book, chapter and verse numbers, so that readers may consult any edition they prefer.

Three principles guide the reading. The *first* is chronological caution: texts are placed within the periods that recent philological research assigns to them, and dating controversies, such as those surrounding the *Arthashastra* and the *Shukraniti*, are treated as part of the evidence rather than as distractions from it. The *second* is plurality: Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jain, Persian and vernacular sources are read alongside one another, in the belief that no single tradition speaks for Indian political thought as a whole. The *third* is critical sympathy: these writings are treated as serious contributions to political knowledge, yet their uncomfortable features, among them espionage, coercion and hierarchy, are examined rather than explained away.

4. The Vocabulary of Statecraft

Any honest account has to begin with words, because the tradition's own terms carry its assumptions. The oldest and most technical of them is *Arthashastra*, the 'science of *artha*'. *Artha* is usually translated as wealth, but the *Arthashastra* defines it more broadly as the livelihood of human beings and, by extension, the earth that human beings inhabit; the science of *artha* is therefore the science of acquiring and protecting the earth (*Arthashastra* 15.1.1-2; Olivelle, 2013). Trautmann (2012) has argued that this makes the text as much a treatise on political economy as on politics, and he is right. For Kautilya, the treasury, agriculture, mining and trade are not auxiliary to power; they are its very substance.

A second term, *dandaniti*, literally "the conduct of the rod", names the disciplined use of coercive authority. The *Arthashastra* gives it a strikingly functional definition: government by the rod is the means of securing what

one does not yet possess, preserving what one has, augmenting what has been preserved, and bestowing the surplus on worthy recipients (*Arthashastra* 1.4.3; Kangle, 1972). Punishment here is not mere retribution. It is the instrument through which order, prosperity and expansion become possible at all.

The third term, *rajadharma*, the “duty of the king”, belongs to the vocabulary of the *dharmashastras* and the epics. It places kingship inside a moral and cosmic order, making the king the protector of the social order of *varna* and *ashrama* and the guarantor of dharma (Kane, 1946; Lingat, 1973). The fourth, *niti*, meaning guidance or policy, became the most elastic of all, stretching from Kamandaka’s Sanskrit *Nitisara* to proverbial verse in Telugu and other vernaculars (Rao & Subrahmanyam, 2009).

The *Arthashastra* also preserves a remarkable glimpse of the arguments that preceded it. In its opening discussion of the sciences, it reports that the school of Manu recognized only three branches of knowledge (the Vedic triad, economics and government), that the school of Brhaspati admitted only economics and government, and that the school of Ushanas held government to be the sole science on which all others depended. Kautilya insists on four, adding *anviksiki*, critical and reasoned inquiry, which he calls the lamp of all the sciences (*Arthashastra* 1.2.1-12; Kangle, 1965). The passage matters for two reasons. It shows that statecraft in India was a field of competing schools rather than a single inherited doctrine, and it shows that at least one strand of that field grounded political knowledge in reasoned inquiry rather than in scriptural authority alone. The text’s style of citing earlier teachers such as Bharadvaja, Vishalaksa and Parashara, only to disagree with them, reinforces the point (Kangle, 1965; McClish, 2019).

5. Imagining the Origins of the State

Where does political authority come from and why should anyone obey it? Indian thinkers returned to these questions again and again, and their answers reveal what they believed the state was for.

The most influential image is *matsyanyaya* (law of the fishes), in which the larger fish devour the smaller ones. The *Arthashastra* invokes it directly: where the rod is not applied, the strong swallow the weak, and it is the rod that allows the weak to survive (*Arthashastra* 1.4.13-14; Olivelle, 2013). The image recurs across the *Mahabharata*, the *dharmashastras* and later *niti* literature. It anchors what one might call a Hobbesian intuition – social life collapses into predation without a coercive sovereign (Ghoshal, 1959; Spellman, 1964). Scholars of Kautilyan realism, notably Liebig (2014), have emphasized how much of the *Arthashastra*’s operational thinking rests on this premise.

The *Shantiparva* of the *Mahabharata*, in which the dying Bhishma instructs Yudhishthira in the duties of kings, offers two memorable origin stories. In the first, humanity in a primordial age needed no king because people protected

one another through *dharma*. When delusion and greed crept in, *dharma* decayed, and the gods turned to Brahma, who composed a vast treatise on *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* that was later abridged by a line of divine teachers, until at last a king was appointed to uphold it (*Mahabharata* 12.59; Fitzgerald, 2004). In the second, people suffering under the law of the fishes approach Manu and agree to give him a share of their grain, livestock and gold in return for protection (*Mahabharata* 12.67; Fitzgerald, 2004). How far the second story amounts to a genuine contract theory has long been debated. Ghoshal (1959) and Sharma (1959) saw in it an early notion of kingship founded on mutual obligation, with taxation as the price of protection. Spellman (1964) and Drekeimer (1962) were more cautious, noting that once royal authority was established, it was rarely imagined as revocable.

Buddhist tradition supplied a quite different myth. The *Aggañña Sutta* of the Digha Nikaya describes how, as beings grew greedy and began to hoard rice and steal from one another, they choose from among themselves the most capable person to rebuke wrongdoers, paying him a share of their rice; he became the Mahasammata, the 'Great Elect' (Collins, 1993). Steven Collins's annotated translation shows that the sutta is in part a satire on brahmanical claims to cosmic superiority. Its political significance lies precisely in the fact that kingship emerges from a social contract rather than from divine creation or the hierarchy of *varna* (Collins, 1993; Tambiah, 1976).

Alongside these theories, the historical record points to early institutions that tempered monarchy. The *Atharvaveda* speaks of the *sabha* and *samiti* as the two daughters of Prajapati (*Atharvaveda* 7.12.1), and Buddhist and Jain sources describe the *gana-sanghas*, oligarchic or "republican" polities such as the Vajjis, in which decisions were taken in assembly (Sharma, 1959; Thapar, 2002). K. P. Jayaswal (1924) famously read this evidence as proof of a Hindu constitutional tradition of popular sovereignty. Later historians found his reading overstated and shaped by the anti-colonial need to demonstrate Indian fitness for self-rule, yet his work had the lasting merit of showing that monarchy was only one of several political forms that early India knew (Altekar, 1949; Sharma, 1959).

6. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*: The Science of the Possible

No text dominates the study of Indian statecraft as the *Arthashastra* does, and none has generated more scholarly argument. Tradition ascribes it to Kautilya, also called Chanakya or Visnugupta, the Brahmin minister who helped Candragupta Maurya overthrow the Nandas at the end of the fourth century BCE. Modern scholarship has complicated this picture considerably. Trautmann's (1971) statistical study of vocabulary suggested that different books of the text bear the marks of different hands. Olivelle (2013), in the most rigorous translation now available, places the composition of the original treatise around the first century CE and its final redaction in the

centuries that followed. McClish (2019) argues that the extant text is a third-century CE redaction of an earlier work. What emerges is not a solitary ancient genius but a living scholarly tradition that absorbed, revised and systematized earlier teachings. It makes the *Arthashastra* a record of several centuries of disciplined thinking about power.

At the heart of the text lies the seven constituent elements of the state, the *saptanga* (seven limbs) : the lord (*swami*), the minister (*amatya*), the countryside and its people (*janapada*), the fortified city (*durga*), the treasury (*kosha*), the army (*danda*) and the ally (*mitra*) (*Arthashastra* 6.1.1; Kangle, 1972). It is tempting to read this as an organic theory of the state. What is more striking is its analytical quality. Kautilya weighs the relative importance of each element, asks which calamity is graver (the ruin of the minister or the ruin of the countryside), and reasons carefully through the consequences (Kangle, 1965). The state here is not a mystical body. It is a system of interdependent capacities that can be measured, strengthened and attacked.

The *Arthashastra*'s ruler is anything but an unbound tyrant. His education is long and exacting, and the text insists that he must conquer his own senses before he can conquer anyone else (*Arthashastra* 1.6; Olivelle, 2013). His day is divided into precise segments for hearing petitions, reviewing revenue and expenditure, consulting ministers and receiving reports from spies (*Arthashastra* 1.19). His interests are explicitly bound to those of his subjects. In their happiness lies his happiness and in their welfare his own (*Arthashastra* 1.19.34). The concept of *yogaksema*, the acquisition of what is needed together with the secure enjoyment of what has been acquired, gives this commitment an institutional shape. It has encouraged some modern readers to speak of a Kautilyan welfare state (Kohli, 1995). The label is anachronistic but the underlying point stands. Legitimacy in the *Arthashastra* depends on performance.

Punishment is also calibrated rather than indiscriminate. A ruler who punishes too harshly terrifies his people and the one who punishes too mildly is held in contempt. Only the one who punishes justly commands respect (*Arthashastra* 1.4.8-10). Torkel Brekke (2004) has shown how carefully the text theorizes coercion, treating violence as a resource to be economized rather than spent freely. The king is not the sole source of law. The *Arthashastra* recognizes four foundations of legal decision, namely *dharma*, transactions, custom and royal edict, and it gives the royal edict precedence when these conflict (*Arthashastra* 3.1.39; Olivelle, 2013), a quietly radical claim about the autonomy of political authority.

Arthashastra's describes an elaborate apparatus of secret agents disguised as ascetics, merchants and householders. It discusses testing the loyalty of ministers through covert temptations, the use of poison and assassins against enemies and the manipulation of religious sentiment for political ends

(Boesche, 2002; Liebig, 2014). Roger Boesche (2003) catalogues Kautilya's willingness to sign treaties he intends to break and his doctrine of silent war against an unsuspecting rival. He also notes the text's insistence that conquered peoples be treated humanely and their customs respected (*Arthashastra* 13.5). Boesche (2002) therefore calls Kautilya the first great political realist, a thinker who understood that politics has its own logic and must be studied on its own terms.

Nowhere is that realism more visible than in the conduct of foreign relations. The *mandala* theory imagines the would-be conqueror (*vijigisu*) at the centre of concentric circles of states. The immediate neighbour is the natural enemy, the neighbour's neighbour the natural ally, and beyond them stand the middle king and the neutral king, whose weight can tip the balance (*Arthashastra* 6.2). Against this map, the text sets out six measures of foreign policy (*sadgunya*): peace, war, remaining stationary, marching, seeking shelter, and the dual policy of making peace with one power while waging war on another, each chosen according to whether a state is declining, stable or advancing (*Arthashastra* 7.1). Alongside these sit the four *upayas*, the means of conciliation, gifts, sowing dissension and open force. George Modelski (1964) was among the first to read this in the *American Political Science Review* as a genuine theory of an international system, and the literature on Kautilya in International Relations has grown steadily since (Bisht, 2020; Shahi, 2019).

McClish (2019) has added an important twist to this story. He argues that the original treatise was empiricist and pragmatic, largely indifferent to the political theology of *dharma*, and that its dharmic framing, in which the king appears as upholder of *varna* and sacred law, was grafted on during later redaction. If he is right, the familiar opposition between a "realist" *Arthashastra* and a "moralist" *dharmashastra* is not a timeless feature of Indian thought. It is the product of a historical process in which an independent political science was gradually absorbed into a religious frame.

7. Kingship within Dharma: Manu, the Epics and the Brahmin Question

If the *Arthashastra* represents Indian statecraft at its most secular, the *Manava Dharmashastra*, the *Law Code of Manu*, represents its absorption into a comprehensive vision of cosmic and social order. The seventh chapter of Manu presents the king as fashioned from the eternal particles of the gods *Indra*, *Vayu*, *Yama*, *Surya*, *Agni*, *Varuna*, *Candra* and *Kubera*, so that he surpasses all beings in splendour (Manu 7.3-7; Olivelle, 2004). In the same chapter, however, the true ruler is *danda* itself: punishment governs all creatures, protects them and stays awake while they sleep (Manu 7.14-18; Olivelle, 2004). Manu's king is thus exalted and constrained at once. He is exalted as a quasi-divine figure, and he is constrained because his purpose is to enforce a *dharma* he does not author and that brahmins interpret.

Jan Gonda (1966) assembled the evidence for the sacral character of the king and showed how Vedic ritual, above all the royal consecration, invested the ruler with religious significance. Yet the sacral king is not the whole story. Louis Dumont (1962), in one of the most debated essays in Indian sociology, argued that Indian kingship was precociously secularized. Because spiritual authority lay with the brahmin, royal power was subordinated to brahmanical status, and politics was thereby freed to become an instrumental domain, the domain of *artha*. J. C. Heesterman (1985) pressed the argument further, identifying what he called the conundrum of the king's authority. The king needed a transcendent legitimacy that only the brahmin could confer, but the ideal brahmin, as a renouncer, stood outside the world of exchange and could never fully give it. Kingship was forever seeking a legitimacy it could not wholly possess.

These theories have drawn serious criticism for their reliance on normative Sanskrit texts and for reproducing a picture of India as a society governed by hierarchy rather than by politics (Inden, 1990). Still, they illuminate something real in the sources. The *dharmashastra* tradition insists that the king take counsel especially from the learned. He respect the customs of regions, castes and guilds (Kane, 1946; Lingat, 1973). The result is what Drekeimer (1962) described as an enduring tension between kingship and community. The king rules and protects the social order but he cannot remake that social order.

The medieval texts carried this dharmic conception forward. Works such as the *Rajadharma* of Laksmidhara's twelfth-century *Krtyakalpataru* and Candeshvara's fourteenth-century *Rajanitiratnakara* compiled older authorities on kingship, taxation and justice for working courts, showing that the classical vocabulary of *rajadharma* remained a living idiom of political legitimation long after the classical age had passed (Kane, 1946).

8. Other Voices: Buddhist, Jain and Tamil Conceptions

Buddhist thought developed its own ideal of the righteous ruler, the cakravatti or wheel-turning king, who conquers by dhamma rather than by the sword. Stanley Tambiah (1976) described the enduring tension in Buddhist political thought between the world conqueror and the world renouncer, two figures who mirror one another and together define the moral horizon of kingship.

The emperor Ashoka gives this ideal historical flesh. His thirteenth rock edict records his remorse after the conquest of Kalinga and his resolve to pursue conquest by dhamma rather than by arms, and his separate edicts in Kalinga declare that all people are his children (Thapar, 1961). Romila Thapar (1961) warned against reading Ashoka's *dhamma* as a straightforwardly Buddhist programme. It should be interpreted instead as a policy of social

cohesion for a vast and heterogeneous empire. Whichever reading one prefers, the edicts remain an extraordinary document: a ruler publicly reflecting on the moral cost of his own violence. Amartya Sen (2005) has drawn on this legacy, together with that of Akbar, to argue that India possessed a long tradition of public reasoning about tolerance and good government.

Jain political thinking, less often discussed, is equally instructive. Somadeva Suri's *Nitivakyamrta*, composed in the tenth century, adapted the *Arthashastra* tradition to a Jain ethical framework, keeping its practical counsel while seeking to temper its violence (Singh, 2017). Upinder Singh (2017) shows that neither Buddhism nor Jainism, for all their commitment to non-violence, could escape the problem of political force. Both ended up negotiating with it rather than abolishing it.

In the Tamil south, the *Tirukkural* offers perhaps the most succinct statement of statecraft in any Indian language. Its second book, on *porul* (wealth and public life), devotes some seventy chapters to kingship, ministers, fortresses, alliances and war. One couplet names the six possessions of a true king as army, people, resources, ministers, allies and fortifications, a list that closely parallels the *saptanga* doctrine while standing in its own literary tradition (*Kural* 381; Pope, 1886). Two adjacent chapters contrast the "right sceptre" of just rule with the "cruel sceptre" of oppression, and the text leaves no doubt that tyranny destroys itself (Pope, 1886). The *Kural* belongs in this account because it demonstrates that the Indian knowledge system of statecraft was plural in its languages and communities, not the property of a single tradition.

9. After Kautilya: Kamandaka, the *Niti* Tradition and the Problem of Dating

The *Arthashastra* did not close the conversation; it opened a long line of successors. The most important is Kamandaka's *Nitisara*, composed around the middle of the first millennium CE, which openly salutes Visnugupta as its master and restates much of his teaching in verse (Dutt, 1896). Upinder Singh's (2010) close reading of the *Nitisara* is among the finest studies of the post-Kautilyan tradition. She argues that Kamandaka's text, while clearly indebted to the *Arthashastra*, represents a later and less exultant reflection on power, one in which the ideal of non-violence has visibly softened the treatment of punishment, the royal hunt and war. Where the *Arthashastra* imagines an assertive, expansionist state, the *Nitisara* is more preoccupied with the limits of monarchical power and the dangers of royal vice (Singh, 2010). This is a valuable corrective to the assumption that Indian statecraft froze after Kautilya.

The *Shukraniti* teaches a different lesson: the need for critical caution. Benoy Kumar Sarkar's (1914) translation made the text widely known, and

early twentieth-century scholars drew on it freely as a source for ancient administration. Sarkar (1922) himself enlisted it in a larger argument that the Hindus possessed positive, secular political institutions comparable to those of Europe. Lallanji Gopal (1962), however, demonstrated through a careful study of its references to firearms and its administrative detail that the text as we have it is very late, possibly no earlier than the nineteenth century. The episode is a reminder that a knowledge system must be studied with the same philological rigour as any other. Enthusiasm is not evidence.

10. Statecraft in the Medieval World: Sultanate, Mughal and Vijayanagara

The establishment of Turkish and later Mughal rule did not interrupt Indian reflection on statecraft; it enriched it with Persian and Islamic traditions of kingship and ethics. The most arresting political text of the Sultanate period is Ziya' al-Din Barani's *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, written around 1358-59. *Barani* confronts, with unusual candour, a problem that troubled Muslim political thinkers everywhere: the practices required to rule effectively, from courtly pomp to severity in punishment and the customs of the pre-Islamic Persian emperors, seemed to contradict the simplicity of the Prophet's example. His resolution was to argue that rulers must frame *zawabit*, state regulations that supplemented the *shari'a* in the practical business of government (Habib & Khan, 1961). Mohammad Habib's introduction to the translation argued that the Delhi Sultanate was therefore not a theocracy in any simple sense, since much of its working law rested on royal regulation rather than on religious law alone (Habib & Khan, 1961). One can hear, across very different traditions, an echo of the *Arthashastra's* recognition that the royal edict is itself a source of law.

Under the Mughals, Abu'l Fazl's *A'in-i Akbari* articulated an exalted theory of kingship in which royalty was a light emanating from God, and the emperor's task was to maintain *sulh-i kull*, peace with all, among subjects of many faiths (Blochmann, 1873). Muzaffar Alam (2004) has shown how Mughal political culture drew on the Persian ethical tradition of *akhlaq*, above all the *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* of Nasir al-Din Tusi, which grounded good government in justice and in the balance of social groups rather than in strict jurisprudence. Alam's argument matters for our theme because it suggests that the Mughal state developed its own languages of political Islam in dialogue with its Indian environment, producing a conception of statecraft in which accommodation and balance were cardinal virtues.

Meanwhile, in the Deccan and the south, Sanskrit and vernacular traditions of *niti* flourished. The Vijayanagara emperor Krsnadevaraya (r. 1509-1529) embedded a substantial discourse on *rajaniti* in his Telugu poem *Amuktamalyada*, advising the king on ministers, forts, revenue, the treatment of foreign merchants and the development of ports (Reddy, 2010). Velcheru

Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2009) have reconstructed a whole corpus of Telugu *niti* writing, from Baddena and Madiki Singana to Krsnadevaraya himself, and argue that it constituted a political discourse distinct from, and at times opposed to, the more conservative, caste-bound vision of the *dharmashastras*. Their work overturns the colonial habit of treating such texts as mere moral maxims, revealing a practical, worldly literature of political wisdom that continued to shape South Indian politics well into the colonial period (Rao & Subrahmanyam, 2009).

What unites these medieval traditions, for all their differences of language and faith, is a shared recognition that politics requires its own kind of knowledge, distinct from religious law though never wholly separate from it. The persistence of that recognition across Sanskrit, Persian, Telugu and Tamil texts is perhaps the strongest argument for speaking of an Indian knowledge system of statecraft at all.

11. Rediscovery and Interpretation in the Modern Era

The modern study of Indian statecraft begins with a single manuscript. In 1905, R. Shamasastri identified a manuscript of the *Arthashastra* in Mysore; he published the Sanskrit text in 1909 and a complete English translation in 1915 (Shamasastri, 1915). The impact was immediate. For nationalist scholars, the text proved that India had possessed a hard-headed science of government long before European contact, and it helped dismantle the colonial claim that Indians were politically immature (Shahi, 2019). Jayaswal's (1924) *Hindu Polity*, Sarkar's (1922) comparative studies and later surveys by Altekar (1949) and Ghoshal (1959) built an entire historiography on this foundation. Jawaharlal Nehru (1946), writing *The Discovery of India* in prison, found in Chanakya a figure of daring intellect. Liebig (2013) has since traced this special relationship between Nehru and Kautilya, arguing that Kautilyan thought retained a latent presence in Indian political and strategic culture even where it went unacknowledged.

Kangle's (1965, 1972) critical edition, translation and study set the standard of philological rigour for half a century, and Rangarajan's (1992) thematically rearranged translation brought the text to a wide readership, particularly in the civil and military services. Olivelle (2013) and McClish and Olivelle (2012) have since provided translations that reflect later advances in the study of the text's history and language.

At the same time, critical voices have warned against uncritical celebration. Ronald Inden (1990) argued that Orientalist scholarship constructed an essentialised India, a timeless civilisation of caste and spirituality lacking historical agency, and that some nationalist responses merely inverted the same framework. R. S. Sharma (1959) insisted on situating political ideas within their material and social contexts, resisting the temptation to read modern democracy into ancient assemblies. More

recently, Deepshikha Shahi (2019) has cautioned against presentism, the reading of neorealist assumptions back into Kautilya, and has proposed treating the *Arthashastra* instead as a resource for a non-Western, eclectic theory of International Relations. Mitra and Liebig (2016) take a different route, emphasizing the modernity of tradition and the ways in which Kautilyan concepts can be productively re-used today.

12. Conclusion

This study concludes with three lessons. The first is that Indian thinkers conceived of the state neither as a purely sacral institution nor as a mere instrument of domination but as a response to a real problem: the collapse of social order into the law of the fishes. Whether the remedy was imagined as divine creation, human agreement or the plain necessity of the rod, the state existed to protect the weak from the strong and to make prosperity possible. This is a far more robust theory of political obligation than the old stereotype of an unpolitical India allows.

The second lesson concerns the relationship between power and morality. The tradition never settled this question and it is to its credit that it did not. The *Arthashastra's* empiricism, Manu's dharmic order, Ashoka's remorse, Kamandaka's tempered realism, Barani's uneasy negotiation with the *shari'a*, Abu'l Fazl's universal peace and Krsnadevaraya's worldly *niti* are different settlements of the same tension. To collapse them into a single "Indian view" would be to lose what is most valuable about them, namely that they argued with one another, across centuries and languages, about how to reconcile the demands of effective rule with the demands of justice.

The third lesson is methodological. If the Indian Knowledge System is to be more than a slogan, its study of statecraft must meet the standards of critical scholarship: careful dating, attention to textual history, awareness of social context, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable features such as espionage, violence and hierarchy. McClish's (2019) history of the *Arthashastra*, Singh's (2017) study of political violence and Rao and Subrahmanyam's (2009) recovery of vernacular *niti* show what such scholarship can achieve. They also show that the most faithful way to honour an intellectual tradition is not to venerate it but to argue with it, as its own authors did.

Kautilya opened his treatise with a salutation to Shukra and Brhaspati, the legendary preceptors of politics (*Arthashastra* 1.1.1), and then proceeded to disagree with almost every authority he cited. That blend of reverence and independence remains the right spirit in which to approach the Indian tradition of statecraft today.

References

- Alam, M., *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200-1800*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

- Altekar, A. S., *State and Government in Ancient India*, Banaras (now Varanasi): Motilal Banarsidass, 1949.
- Bisht, M., *Kautilya's Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy*, London: Routledge, 2020.
- Blochmann, H. (trans.), *The Ain-i-Akbari* by Abul Fazl Allam, Vol. 1, Calcutta (now Kolkata): Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873.
- Boesche, R., *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and his Arthashastra*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002.
- Boesche, R., "Kautilya's Arthashastra on war and diplomacy in ancient India", *The Journal of Military History*, 67(1), 2003, 9-37.
- Brekke, T., "Wielding the rod of punishment: War and violence in the political science of Kautilya", *Journal of Military Ethics*, 3(1), 2004, 40-52.
- Collins, S., "The discourse on what is primary (Aggañña-Sutta): An annotated translation, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 21(4), 1993, 301-393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01089255>
- Drekmeier, C., *Kingship and community in early India*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962.
- Dumont, L., "The conception of kingship in ancient India", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 6, 1962, 48-77.
- Dutt, M. N. (trans.), *Kamandakiya Nitisara*, or The Elements of Polity, Calcutta (now Kolkata): Elysium Press, 1896.
- Fitzgerald, J. L. (ed. & trans.), *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 7, *Book 11: The book of the women; Book 12: The book of peace*, part one, Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Ghoshal, U. N., *A history of Indian political ideas: The ancient period and the period of transition to the Middle Ages*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Gonda, J., *Ancient Indian kingship from the religious point of view*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966.
-, "The Shukraniti: A nineteenth-century text", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 25(1-3), 1962, 524-556.
- Habib, M., & Khan, A. U. S., *The political theory of the Delhi Sultanate* (including a translation of Ziauddin Barani's Fatawa-i Jahandari, circa 1358-9 A.D.), Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1961.
- Heesterman, J. C., *The inner conflict of tradition: Essays in Indian ritual, kingship, and society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Inden, R., *Imagining India*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Jayaswal, K. P., *Hindu polity: A constitutional history of India in Hindu times*, Calcutta (now Kolkata): Butterworth & Co., 1924.
- Kane, P. V., *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol. 3, Poona (now Pune): Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1946.
- Kangle, R. P., *The Kautiliya Arthashastra*, Part III: A study, Bombay: University of Bombay, 1965.
- Kangle, R. P., *The Kautiliya Arthashastra*, Part II: An English translation with critical and explanatory notes, 2nd ed., 1972, Bombay: University of Bombay.

- Kapoor, K., & Singh, A. K. (eds.), *Indian knowledge systems*, Vols. 1-2, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study; New Delhi: D. K. Printworld Pvt. Ltd., 2005.
- Kohli, R., *Kautilya's political theory: Yogakshema, the concept of welfare state (foreword by M.M. Sankhdher)*, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1995.
- Liebig, M., "Kautilya's relevance for India today", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 69(2), 2013, 99-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928413481881>
- Liebig, M., "Statecraft and intelligence analysis in the Kautilya-Arthashastra", *Journal of Defence Studies*, 8(4), 2014, 27-54.
- Lingat, R., *The classical law of India* (J. D. M. Derrett, Trans.), Derrett, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973.
- Mahadevan, B., Bhat, V. R., & Nagendra Pavana, R. N., *Introduction to Indian knowledge system: Concepts and applications*, Delhi: PHI Learning, 2022.
- McClish, M., *The history of the Arthashastra: Sovereignty and sacred law in ancient India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108641586>
- McClish, M., & Olivelle, P. (eds. & trans.), *The Arthashastra: Selections from the classic Indian work on statecraft*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development, *National Education Policy 2020*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2020.
- Mitra, S. K., & Liebig, M., *Kautilya's Arthashastra: An intellectual portrait: The classical roots of modern politics in India*, Germany: Baden-Baden, 2016.
- Modelski, G., "Kautilya: Foreign policy and international system in the ancient Hindu world", *American Political Science Review*, 58(3), 1964, 549-560.
- Nehru, J., *The Discovery of India*, Calcutta (now Kolkata): Signet Press, 1946.
- Olivelle, P., *The Law Code of Manu*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Olivelle, P., *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthashastra*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Parekh, B., "Some reflections on the Hindu tradition of political thought", T. Pantham & K. L. Deutsch (eds.), *Political Thought in Modern India*, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1986, 17-31.
- Pope, G. U. (trans.), *The sacred Kural of Tiruvalluva-Nayanar*, London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1886.
- Rangarajan, L. N. (ed. & trans.), *Kautilya: The Arthashastra*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992.
- Rao, V. N., & Subrahmanyam, S., "Notes on political thought in medieval and early modern South India", *Modern Asian Studies*, 43(1), 2009, 175-210. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X07003368>
- Reddy, S. (trans.), *Giver of the worn garland: Krishnadevaraya's Amuktamalyada*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010.
- Sarkar, B. K. (trans.), *The Sukraniti* (The Sacred Books of the Hindus), Vol. 13, Allahabad: Panini Office, 1914.
- Sarkar, B. K., *The political institutions and theories of the Hindus: A study in comparative politics*, Leipzig, Germany: Verlag Von Markert & Petters, 1922.

- Sen, A., *The argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian history, culture and identity*, London: Allen Lane, 2005.
- Shahi, D., *Kautilya and non-Western IR theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Shamasastri, R. (trans.), *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, Bangalore: Government Press, 1915.
- Sharma, R. S., *Aspects of political ideas and institutions in ancient India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959.
- Singh, U., "Politics, violence and war in Kamandaka's Nitisara", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 47(1), 2010, 29-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460904700102>
- Singh, U., *Political violence in ancient India*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Spellman, J. W., *Political theory of ancient India: A study of kingship from the earliest times to circa A.D. 300*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.
- Tambiah, S. J., *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Thapar, R., *Ashoka and the decline of the Mauryas*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Thapar, R., *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*, London: Allen Lane, 2002.
- Trautmann, T. R., *Kautilya and the Arthashastra: A statistical investigation of the authorship and evolution of the text*, Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1971.
- Trautmann, T. R., *Arthashastra: The science of wealth*, New Delhi: Allen Lane, 2012.
- Weber, M., "Politics as a vocation", H. H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (eds. & trans.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, 77-128. ★