

## ANCIENT INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

### I. Sources of the Ancient Indian Political Thought

It is, in fact, very difficult to obtain a particular book or a piece of literature that describes the various sources of the ancient Indian political thought, which are scattered all over India. Despite this, it is essential to acknowledge that some scholarly work was carried out in the field of ancient Indian political thought. As a result, some of the widely available classical Indian political thought sources are ancient monuments, religious works, epics, and political systems practised during those times.

The following is a brief description of some of the important sources of political thought:

**1. The Vedas:** The Vedas are regarded as the original works of Gods at the time of the world's creation and so are considered the original source of information. Though Vedas do not describe the political system that existed, information can be drawn from the concepts like King, Kingship, Saints or Rishis, etc., and their duties towards the subjects. It is interesting to note that institutions like Sabha and Samithi that are prevalent even today have their roots in the Vedic period.

**2. The Mahabharata:** This Indian epic is considered a classic work on the art of politics. Specific episodes like Shanti Parva provide outstanding information related to political philosophy, the administrative system, and the political system of the time. The entire art of statecraft, diplomacy, war ethics and strategies, state relations and the like can be very well understood by making a reference to the Mahabharata.

**3. The Arthashastra:** This work authored by Kautilya is again a masterpiece on the polity. According to Prof Altekar, it is mainly concerned with the practical problems of governance and describes its machinery and functions in times of war and peace. This work of Kautilya also highlights issues like taxation, diplomacy, war strategies and revolution. It is also a handbook of economics as well as administration for the kings.

**4. Works of Thinkers:** Some of the great works that act as significant sources of the political thought of ancient India are the Smritis, Kamandakeya Neethisaara, Sukraneetisara and the like. Smritis advocated that a king was the servant of the subjects and that it was not wrong to kill a tyrant. Moreover, a king was expected to be virtuous, gracious and helpful. Similarly, Kamandakeya Neethisaara was also a source of ancient Indian political thought. It was, in fact, a summary of Kautilya's Arthashastra. The work highlights the king and his family and the monarchical form of government. Sukraneetisara was supposed to have been written sometime between 1200 and 1600 BC. Though that is not available now, the work enlightens about the position held by high officials of the state and their functions, administrative system, monarchy and the political life of the people.

**5. Inscriptions:** Stone and copper inscriptions throw light on the contemporary political life of the people and the administrative system of those days.

**6. Accounts of Foreign Travellers:** The writings of foreign travellers to India like Megasthenes, Fahien, Huang Tsang and others provide important information about the ancient Indian society, administration, trade and industry and the like.

**7. Other Sources:** Apart from the above sources on the ancient Indian political thought, the following books give extensive knowledge: Brihaspati Sutra, Neeti Vakya Niritha of Somadeva, Rajaneethi Ratnakara, Veeramrityodaya, Rajaneethi Mayukha, Puranas, Coins and seals found in the excavations and the Jain and Buddhist literature

## II. Varna System

The *varnas* have been known since a hymn in the Rigveda (the oldest surviving Indian text) that portrays the Brahman (priest), the Kshatriya (noble), the Vaishya (commoner), and the Shudra (servant) issued forth at creation from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet of the primeval person (*Purusha*). Males of the first three *varnas* are “twice-born” (*dvija*): after undergoing the ceremony of spiritual rebirth (*upanayana*), they are initiated into manhood and are free to study the Vedas, the ancient scriptures of Hinduism. The Shudra lives in service to the other three. The Vaishya, in turn, as common people, grazers, and cultivators, contrast with the governing classes—i.e., the secular Kshatriya, or barons, and the priestly Brahmins. Brahmins and Kshatriya discern that the former are the priests, while the latter has the actual dominion. In the older description, far greater emphasis is placed on the functions of the classes than on hereditary membership, in contradistinction to caste, which emphasizes heredity over function. The system of the four classes (*caturvarnya*) is fundamental to the views the traditional lawgivers held of society. They specified a different set of obligations for each: the task of the Brahman is to study and advise, the baron (Kshatriya) to protect, the Vaishya to cultivate, and the serf (Shudra) to serve. History shows, however, that the four-class system was more a social model than a reality. The multitudinous of castes (or *jati*) is explained by hypergamous and hypergamous alliances between the four classes and their descendants. The inclusion of the Shudra into the four-*varna* system bestowed on them a measure of dignity. A move to accommodate still others not so distinguished led to the somewhat unofficial acceptance of a fifth class, the *pancama* (Sanskrit: “fifth”), which include the “untouchable” classes and others, such as tribal groups, who are outside the system and consequently, *avarana* (“classless”). In modern times, traditional Hindus, awakened to the inequities of the caste system yet believing the four-*varna* system to be fundamental to the good society, have often advocated a return to this clear-cut *varna* system by reforming castes. Individual castes, in turn, have sought to raise their social rank by identifying with a particular *varna* and demanding its privileges of rank and honour.

## III. The Purusharthas

The *Purusharthas* are the inherent values of the Universe: *Artha* (economic values), *Kama* (pleasure), *Dharma* (righteousness), and *Moksha* (liberation). The Purusharthas are the blueprint for human fulfilment. Working with them helps you create a satisfyingly balanced, meaningful life at the deepest and most holistic level. They offer a way for evaluating your life and making good decisions. Knowing your goals brings meaning to your spiritual practice.

*Purushatha* means “for the purpose of the Self, take a moment and ask yourself, ‘Am I managing my life in a way to support my spiritual growth?’ and ‘What do I really, really want at the level of my Soul?’”

The original Vedic texts only suggested the three goals of *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*. In the later Upanishadic era, when people began to seek higher consciousness, the fourth goal of *Moksha* was added. Although the first three are somewhat interwoven, it is felt that the “right action” of *Dharma* is a necessary requirement for *Artha* to be meaningful and the abundance of *Artha* will be needed to support *Kama*. The path to liberation or enlightenment of *Moksha* is supported by the harmonious interaction of *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*.

### 1. **Dharma**

*Dharma* means truth, the right way of living, and human behaviours considered necessary for the order of things in the world. On a grander scale, it refers to the cosmic law or rules that created the Universe from chaos. On an individual level, you can think of *Dharma* as your true purpose in life or the ethical basis on which you live your life. It is also:

- Being conscious in your actions, words, and thoughts.
- Having compassion and sensitivity to the needs of others.
- Being awake to the existence of the Divine within you.
- Ultimately, *Dharma* leads you to remember who you really are.

*Dharma* also brings stability and order, a life that is lawful and harmonious, and the striving to do the right thing, to be virtuous, to be helpful to others, and to interact successfully with society. The great Indian text, *The Bhagavad Gita* says, “*The greatest dereliction/negligence of Dharma is to desert the helpless in their time of need.*” *The Bhagavad Gita* also says, “*Better your own Dharma though imperfect than the Dharma of another done perfectly.*” This means that you need to find your own truth and even though you may make mistakes along the way, this is still preferable to trying to copy others. Vedanta tells us that you can discover your *Dharma* by studying sacred teachings from the examples of highly evolved people, reflecting on and following what satisfies your heart, and listening to your deepest inner feelings. Vedanta tells us that you will know when you are in *Dharma* when your actions are spontaneously correct, you automatically know what to do in any situation, you are in harmony with and your life is supported by everything around you, you feel complete within yourself, and life becomes effortless.

*Dharma* is considered the first of the *Purusharthas* because without it, *Artha* and *Kama* can easily become self-destructive. However, *Artha* and *Kama*, when balanced, also serve to support your Dharmic Path and eventually your outward *Dharma* leads you to inner *Moksha*.

### 2. **Artha**

*Artha* is the security of having the material comfort you need to live in the world with ease. While some people think that to be spiritual means to be poor, *Artha* is not about rejecting the world, but being content with the things you own. It’s to live skilfully in a world of material objects that exist for your benefit. *Artha* is one of the basic human dignities—to have enough assets to live on and care for your family, without hoarding or being greedy. *Artha* guides you to ask the question, “What do I see as truly valuable?”. Needs vary from person to person. *Artha* includes everything in your environment that allows you to live a fulfilling life and also

the means to achieve it. It includes knowledge, friendships, love, career, skills, good health, and prosperity. The Upanishads tell us, “*There is no joy in smallness, joy is in the infinite.*” *Artha* provides the foundation for *Dharma* and *Kama*. Without prosperity and security in society or at the individual level, both moral life and sensuality become difficult. However, it’s important that your “worldly success” doesn’t violate the moral responsibility of your *Dharma* and your journey toward *Moksha* (spiritual liberation). Ultimately, *Artha* is the pursuit of activities and means necessary for a joyous and pleasurable life.

Vedanta says that you should:

- Discover a way so money runs after you and not vice versa.
- Do work that is compatible to your nature and capabilities.
- Do work that serves society.
- Do work you really love.
- Trust in the infinite organizing power of the Universe.

### 3. **Kama**

The desire for pleasure is what drives human behaviour. A life without pleasure and enjoyment is hollow and empty. *Kama* relates to this pleasure, which can be sensuality, but is also art, music, beauty, love, intimacy, affection, fellowship, and kindness—it’s what brings a sense of delight to your life. The right kinds of pleasure lead you toward your *Dharma* and help you fulfil it with passion. *Kama* is good and necessary when it exists to support *Dharma* and becomes part of the richness of life. However, excessive *Kama* can lead to overindulgence/greed, addiction, sloth/apathy and lust.

To successfully practice *Kama*, you must ask, “Are my pleasures aligned with my life’s purpose?” The Upanishads tell us, “*As is your desire so is your will, as is your will so is your deed, as is your deed so is your destiny and You are what your deep driving desire is.*” To practice *Kama* from a yogic perspective means to practice being fully present with whatever you’re experiencing. *Kama* is a total sensory experience that includes discovering the object, learning about the object, establishing emotional connection, learning the process of enjoyment, and experiencing the resulting feeling of well-being before, during, and after the experience. Vedanta warns us that *Kama* should be followed with thought, care, caution, and enthusiasm, and be free from worries and egotistical problems. Know and seek which pleasures are saturated with Divine Consciousness and are drenched/flooded in the ecstasies of the soul. Ultimately, the highest *Kama* is the longing for Oneness with the Divine.

### 4. **Moksha**

When you live your *Dharma*, fully supported by *Artha* and *Kama*, *Moksha* or the final liberation dawns. *Moksha* is your true nature—it’s who you really are. It includes:

- Emancipation/freedom.
- Liberation.
- Freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth.
- Freedom from ignorance.
- Self-realization and self-knowledge.

- Consciousness of the Oneness of the Supreme Soul.
- The removal of obstacles to an unrestricted life.
- Access to our full human potential of creativity, compassion, and understanding.

Vedanta tells us that liberation comes to those who know Brahman as that which is the origin and end of all things, the universal principle behind and at source of everything that exists, and the consciousness that pervades everything and everyone. Such realization comes from self-knowledge and self-discipline. *Moksha* is self-discipline that is so perfect that it becomes unconscious, second nature, an unworldly understanding, and a state of bliss. This liberation comes from a life lived with inner purity, alert mind, led by reason, intelligence, and realization of the Supreme Self who dwells in all beings. *Moksha* is seen as a final release from life's illusion. The Upanishads describe the liberated individual as one who treats others with respect (regardless of how others treat him/her); returns anger with soft and kind words; doesn't expect praise from others; never injures or harms any life form; is as comfortable being alone as in the presence of others; and is humble of clear and steady mind, straightforward, compassionate, and patient.

#### **IV. Rajdharma**

Manu has mentioned physical, spiritual and political basis of the state. The political basis of the state comprises the executive, legislative and judicial organs. Executive consists of the King or swami or Raja, his council of ministers and his permanent civil services. The king is the head of the state. He should be endowed with various qualities, duties and dharma which he called in Rajdharma as follows:

- The Lord created the King for the protection of all, taking eternal particles of Indra (King of deities), of Wind (Vayu), of Yama, of Sun, of Fire (Agni) of Water (Varun), of the Moon and of the Lord of wealth Kuber, thus Manu accepts the divine origin of Kingship. The king is a great deity in human form.
- The King is subject to Dharma and should form ideal council of Ministers for consultations in all matters.
- The King should worship daily the aged Brahmin who knows the Vedas and puranas. The king should have both qualities from Kshyatria and Brahmin.
- King constantly should learn modesty from Brahmin for a king who is modest never perishes.
- The King should reject various vices springing from love of pleasure and proceeding from rage which all end in misery such as hunting, gambling, sleeping by day, excess with women, drunkenness, violence, treachery, envy and greedy, etc.
- To preserve law and order in his kingdom and to punish offenders and to promote public welfare, the king should always be careful. Manu writes, "punishment alone governs all created beings, it alone protects them, watches over them while they sleep, so punishment is as to be identical with law".
- Manu lays down a daily routine of the King. They are: Meditation, worship (of Brahmin and God), listening public complains, consultation with ambassadors,

spies, army chief, inspection in all fields and administrative works and rest with a music.

- Manu has regarded Dharma as rule of law which no earthly Monarch can ignore. The Monarch is responsible to the people and derives his authority from the people. People owe loyalty to the ruler only when the latter discharges its duty of protecting them properly.
- The capital should be well fortified by the construction of strong forts of different kinds.
- Taxes should be collected from rich people only.
- Well prepared for war at any time in case of external attack, no dependence upon others in war
- Establishment of diplomatic relationship with other nations properly.

Thus the king holds his high office so that he may protect the people, help everyone in his own self-knowledge and in the discharge of his own Rajdharma and duties.

## KAUTILYA

Kautilya is also known as Chanakya or Vishnu Guptha. He was the teacher of Economics and Political Science at the ancient Takshashila University. He was the Prime Minister of first Maurya Emperor Chandra Guptha Maurya. He lived during 350-275 BC. He was born in the 'Kutil' gotra. He was educated in Takshashila University and became a Professor of Political Economy. He studied architecture and medicine. Kautilya witnessed the defeat of some parts of India by Alexander the Great. He realised that it is due to the Republican system that existed in the sub-continent. Therefore, he was of the opinion that a centralised power is very much essential for the survival of a large state.

Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' is a great book on Political Science and Economics. The term 'arthashastra' can be translated as "science of political economy". It contains the ancient Indian Political thought. It explains the Hindu concept of Law and Justice. It also contains the Hindu ideas of Kingship and the State. It deals with mode of autocracy, framework of administration, and economics and welfare of the people.

Arthashastra contains many geo-political ideas regarding the territory of the state. According to Kautilya, the following are the qualities of a territory of janapada:- (1) It should have enough space for the construction of forts. (2) It should have enough provisions for those inside and those who come from outside. (3) It should have enough defense (4) It should hate the enemy (5) It should not have no hostile association of people (6) It should have agricultural lands, mines and forests (7) It should not depend upon rain for water supply (8) The people should be faithful and pure at heart.

### V. Kautilya Theory of Saptanga

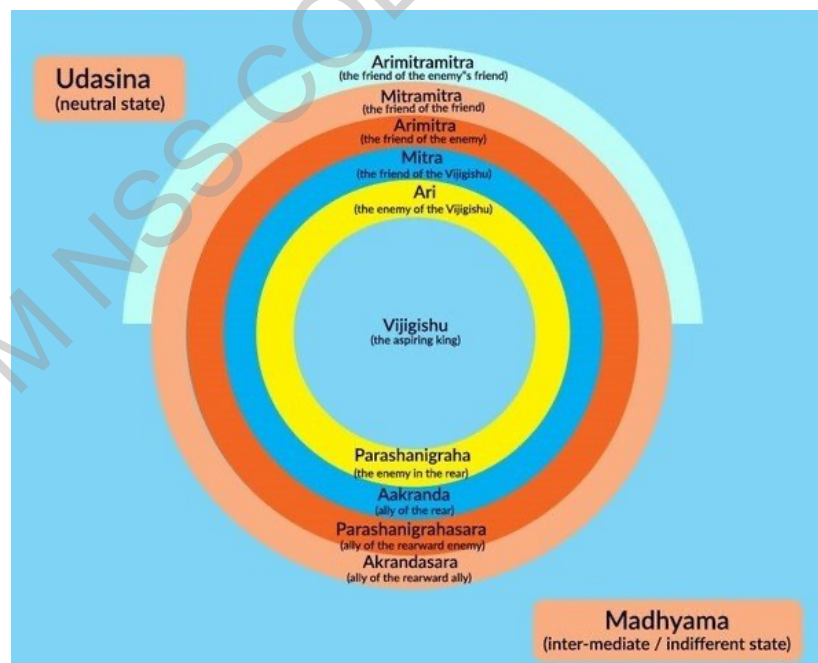
According to Kautilya, a state has seven elements or constituents, namely, Swamin—the King, Amatya—the Minister, Janapada—the Land, and the People, Durga—the Fortress, Kosha—the Treasury, Danda—the Army and Mitra—the Allies. This entire set-up of the kingdom was described as Saptanga theory in ancient India.

The Swamin refers to the king, regarded as the indispensable, integral and inseparable part of the state in ancient India. King in all cases belonged to the noble and royal family who possessed qualities of both head and heart. Amatya or the minister refers to all the officials involved in the functioning of the government. It is their responsibility to ensure that the government runs smoothly. Janapada implies the land and the people and, according to Kautilya, must be fertile. The term 'Durga' in the ancient India means fort, which is considered an extremely important element. Usually, forts were constructed on the borders of the territory. Kautilya, in fact, divided these forts into water, hill, desert and forest forts. The fifth element is Kosha or the treasury. Kautilya opined that a king must amass wealth to promote the welfare of the people and also maintain his army.

Danda referred to the armed forces to protect the state from aggressions and maintain law and order within the state. Kautilya suggested that it is the responsibility of the king to see that his army is content with its role in the state. Finally, Mitra refers to a friend or allies. A king must have certain dependable friends who help him in all calamities. A king's immediate neighbour becomes an enemy and an enemy's enemy becomes a friend of the king. The Saptanga theory was, in fact, famous all through the ancient period.

The state was regarded as a physical organism and its elements as the parts of the body. It was stated that king was considered the head, ministers as the eyes, and treasury as the face, army as the mind, fort as the hands and country as a whole as the legs of the human body.

## VI. Mandala Theory



*Your neighbor is your natural enemy and the neighbor's neighbor is your friend".* This was the basic thought behind Kautilya's Mandala Theory. And it is the very first thought that comes to one's mind when we read the texts of Kautilya. Mandala is a Sanskrit word which means

'circles'. Mandala theory of foreign policy, is based on the geographical assumption that the immediate neighbor state is most likely to be an enemy (real or potential) and a state next to the immediate neighbor is likely to be one's friend, after a friendly state comes an unfriendly state (friend of the enemy state) and next to that a friendly state (friend of a friendly state) and so on i.e., "*With respect to the middle king [he himself], the third and the fifth constituents are friendly elements. The second, the fourth, and the sixth are unfriendly elements.*" However he also recognized the existence of neutral and mediating states. To understand it easily, imagine a series of states to one's west, and then number them starting with oneself. States numbered 1, 3, 5, 7, and so on will likely be friends, whereas states 2, 4, 6, 8, and so on will probably be enemies. (The same thing can be done with concentric circles, which would look more like a mandala, but it is difficult to envision these circles as states.) Kautilya put this basic principle in a number of different ways, but most simply as, "One with immediately proximate territory is the natural enemy."

The Mandala concept is one in which there are circles of friends and foes with the central point being the King and his State. This embraces twelve kings in the vicinity and he considers the kingdoms as neighbors, the states which are the enemies neighbors are his enemies' friends and the next circle of states are his friends. He also believes that the states which are his neighbors and are also neighbors of his enemies are neutral and should always be treated with respect. He believes that this circle is dynamic and the King should strive to be expanding his central position and reduce the power of the other kings in the vicinity. He also proposes to build alliances with states which are two degrees away from the center to create a balance of power.

The mandala, as comprising 12 types of kings/states, it is classified as follows:

1. The would-be conqueror, at the center of the mandala. (*Vijigishu*)
2. The enemy whose territory borders on that of the would-be conqueror, i.e., the hostile neighbor
3. The ally's whose territory lies immediately beyond that of the hostile neighbor
4. The enemy's ally who is the neighbor of one's own ally.
5. The ally's ally who is territorially distant. (*Vijigishu*)
6. The ally of the enemy's ally who is also territorially distant.
7. The rear of the would-be conqueror, i.e., rearward enemy
8. Rearward friend
9. Friend of the rearward enemy
10. Friend of friend is the rearward friend
11. A neutral king/state neighboring both the would-be conqueror and his/its enemy but is stronger than both.
12. The king is very indifferent towards all other kings/states but is more powerful than the would-be conqueror, his enemy and the neutral king/ state.

In a system of mandala, Kautilya advocated six-fold policy to interact with the neighbors, which included co-existence, neutrality, alliance, double policy, march and war. To achieve this he advised the king to resort to five tactics: conciliation, gift and bribery, dissension/disagreement, deceit and pretense, open attack or war. As such on the question of treaty and alliance, he suggests: "A King should not hesitate to break any friendship or alliances that are later found to be disadvantageous."



In the whole spectrum of Mandal, the Vijigishu functions as a sort of balance of power by asserting his own supremacy. It is assumed that the two adjacent states are normally hostile and consequently two states with another intervening between them would be friendly, being common enemies of the latter. The neutral is the strongest power in the neighborhood. The intermediary is intermediate in strength between the neutral and the other powers.

**Estimate of Kautilya:** Kautilya was one who even defeated Alexander the Great. His statecraft was perfect and fool proof. It was based on philosophy as well as practical wisdom. When compared with the contemporary political thinkers elsewhere in the world, Kautilya was way ahead of all of them in almost all aspects of state craft. He was realistic, systematic and practical. He was able to convert idealism into practical realms with a touch of realism. For Kautilya, it was not just philosophy to create an utopian state. For him it was the question of running a great empire. That made him all the more different from contemporary political thinkers or those who were to follow him for centuries. Kautilya was also able to blend the ancient religious traditions also into the art of government while keeping the subtle difference from affecting the secular environment of state craft. On any account, it can be stated that a meaningful appreciation of Kautilya as a political thinker will definitely place him at the zenith of the art and science of political thinking.

In spite of the superiority of Kautilya's philosophy and practice, his system of administration did not last for more than two centuries. May be because, the later kings could not practice the system properly. It could be also because of the fact that a system based on the concept of Dharma deteriorated because the later kings were not able to preserve dharma. There could have been quite a number of internal conflicts also like the transformation of varna system into caste system based on exploitation.