An Introduction to Ancient Indian Political and Social Thought (c. 1500 BCE–550 CE)

by Edward O'Mahony

Includes a Glossary, Teaching Resources, Classroom Activities & Assessments, along with condensed versions of the article for middle school and high school students.

Abstract

While the Indian subcontinent is famous for its religious traditions, its equally rich tradition of political and social thought is not as well known. In recent decades, scholars in India and other countries have revived the study of the subcontinent's ancient political and social philosophers. They have shown how the work of philosophers such as Kautilya and Kamendaka were closely intertwined with contemporary religious and cultural institutions and played an important role in both molding and supporting those institutions. The primary objective of these political philosophers was to maintain the Indian caste system and social order by making monarchical rule more effective. Kautilya is best known for developing a realpolitik approach to both domestic and foreign affairs. While he encouraged rulers to be ruthless in dealing with foreign and domestic opponents, Kautilya also encouraged monarchs to adopt a system of domestic paternalism, in which public works and other systems were used to benefit and placate ordinary people. He has been associated by some scholars with Chanakya, the main adviser to Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire. The *Laws of Manu* similarly focused on maintaining the social order by assigning specific duties and obligations to each member of the caste system, including the king. Kamendaka, who may have lived during the late stages of the Gupta Empire, focused heavily in his work on the use of diplomacy and defensive military tactics to ensure the integrity of the state. This article is intended for middle school and high school World History teachers. Students in such classes generally learn a lot about India's religious traditions, but relatively little about its political develop or ideas. Shorter versions of the article and worksheets are provided for use in the classroom.

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Introduction

While the Indian subcontinent is famous for its religious traditions, its equally rich tradition of political and social thought is not as well known. In recent decades, scholars in India and other countries have revived the study of the subcontinent's ancient political and social philosophers. They have shown how the work of such philosophers as Kautilya and Kamendaka was closely intertwined with contemporary religious and cultural institutions and played an important role in both molding and supporting those institutions. This article provides readers with an introduction to the key political philosophers of ancient India, as well as the cultural and political background within which they were formulating their ideas.

The Aryans

Around 1500 BCE, a nomadic, pastoral people known as the **Aryans** took control of the Indus River valley and later the Gangetic plain in what is now India and Pakistan. This period is described in the *Vedas*, the sacred writings of the Aryans that later became the foundation of Hinduism. Originally, there were three classes within early Aryan society, consisting of priests, warriors, and commoners. As the Aryans expanded and subsumed non-Aryan peoples, a hierarchical caste system emerged in which the non-Aryans formed the lowest rung (see Figure 1).

This social structure, referred to as the *varna* system, divided people into four semi-rigid classes or castes. The *Brahmins* were the priestly class, followed by the *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaisyas* (merchants, artisans and landowners), and *Sudras* (poor farmers and laborers). Another category of people, known as the *Pariahs*, were outside the caste system and performed menial and ritually unclean labor such as burning corpses. Although the Kshatriyas were regarded as the warriors and rulers within Aryan society, they were supposed to be guided in their actions by the Brahmins. The role of the Vaisyas and Sudras was to support the upper castes. This system of vertical stratification formed the foundation for later religious and political thought.

During this period, Aryan society seems to have developed into a system of mutual interdependence, with each group relying to varying degrees on other groups to ensure that society could function properly. This interdependence led to an intense fear, particularly among the Brahmin caste, of societal breakdown and anarchy. This fear permeated Indian political and social thought for centuries. For most Indian political
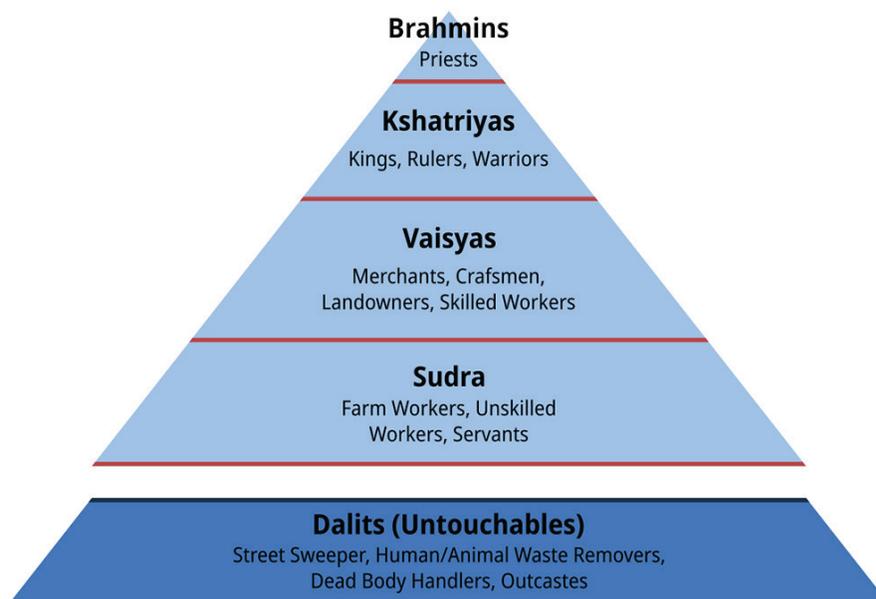
Figure 1: The Indian caste system. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

philosophers, who came primarily from the Brahmin caste, the primary duty of the king (*rajadharma*) was to maintain the social order. However, as the historian John Spellman points out, kingship was never regarded as a good thing, because kings could be cruel and unjust. It was seen as the lesser of two evils, because anarchy was worse. This made kingship a regrettable but extremely necessary institution. **Most Indian political philosophers focused less on the legitimacy of monarchy as an institution; instead they concentrated on how to make monarchical rule more effective.**

The Sramana Movement

These ideas were part of a broader movement of philosophical and religious speculation in India that took place during the Axial Age (8th to 3rd century BCE). This era, which occurred more or less independently in various parts of Asia and Europe during the first millennium BCE, saw the development of Confucianism in China, Zoroastrianism in Persia, Judaism in Israel, and philosophy in Greece. In India, much of this speculation occurred in the eastern Gangetic Plain, in the towns and villages along the Ganges River, where it became known as the Sramana movement.

Around 1000 BCE, groups of Aryans began migrating from the Indus River valley to the Gangetic Plain in search of better grasslands for their cattle. While the Aryans dominated the local population, their control was not absolute. In particular, the Brahmin caste did not have the same level of authority in the eastern regions as they had in the Indus River valley. As a result, indigenous cultures and ideas continued to thrive in these areas.

The rich soil along the Ganges produced abundant crops, enabling large population growth and the development of cities and towns. This area, particularly around modern-day Patna (in northeast India), also had large deposits of iron and other mineral resources, which led to the rise of manufacturing and extensive trade links. These developments helped to create a wealthy educated upper class, which was dominated by Kshatriyas and Brahmins, but also included members of all castes, including rich Vaisyas and Sudras.

It was in this context that the Sramana movement (c. 800–200 BCE) developed. This movement consisted of a collection of disparate groups with wildly varying viewpoints, all of which rejected the authority of the Brahmins. By this stage, the Vedic religion, or Brahmanism, had developed into a highly ritualized ceremonial faith that revolved around sacrifice to the gods to ensure worldly favors for the supplicants. It avoided, for the most part, issues of ethical or spiritual significance.

By contrast, these were the issues on which the Sramana movement focused. Altogether, there were five major schools and numerous sects within the movement. Figure 2 illustrates the location of many of the schools where these ideas were developed. One of them, the Carvaka school, completely rejected the concept of gods or an afterlife. Its materialist philosophy focused instead on what could be proven through perception. By contrast, all the other schools sought to achieve an individual spiritual connection with the divine. Out of their philosophical speculations developed the Upanishads, a series of commentaries on the Vedas.

It was in the Upanishads that the concept of **monism** first developed: the idea of a universal spirit. Known as the **Brahman**, this universal spirit was the source of all creation and inhabited all things within the universe. Out of this concept emerged the various ideas that later formed Hinduism. Hindus believe that the soul (*atman*) is eternal and wishes to return to its original source, the Brahman, but that it is tied to the material world because of ignorance (*avidya*). This ignorance prevents people from realizing that the material world is an illusion (*maya*). As a result, souls are tied to the material world through the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*). A person's rebirth is largely determined by their actions (*karma*) in this life. A person with good karma can be reborn into a higher caste, which brings them closer to achieving *moksha*, when their soul finally reunites with the Brahman. Good karma (actions) is heavily dependent on each individual fulfilling the roles they have been given in life. These roles, and the rules governing them, are referred to as *dharma*.
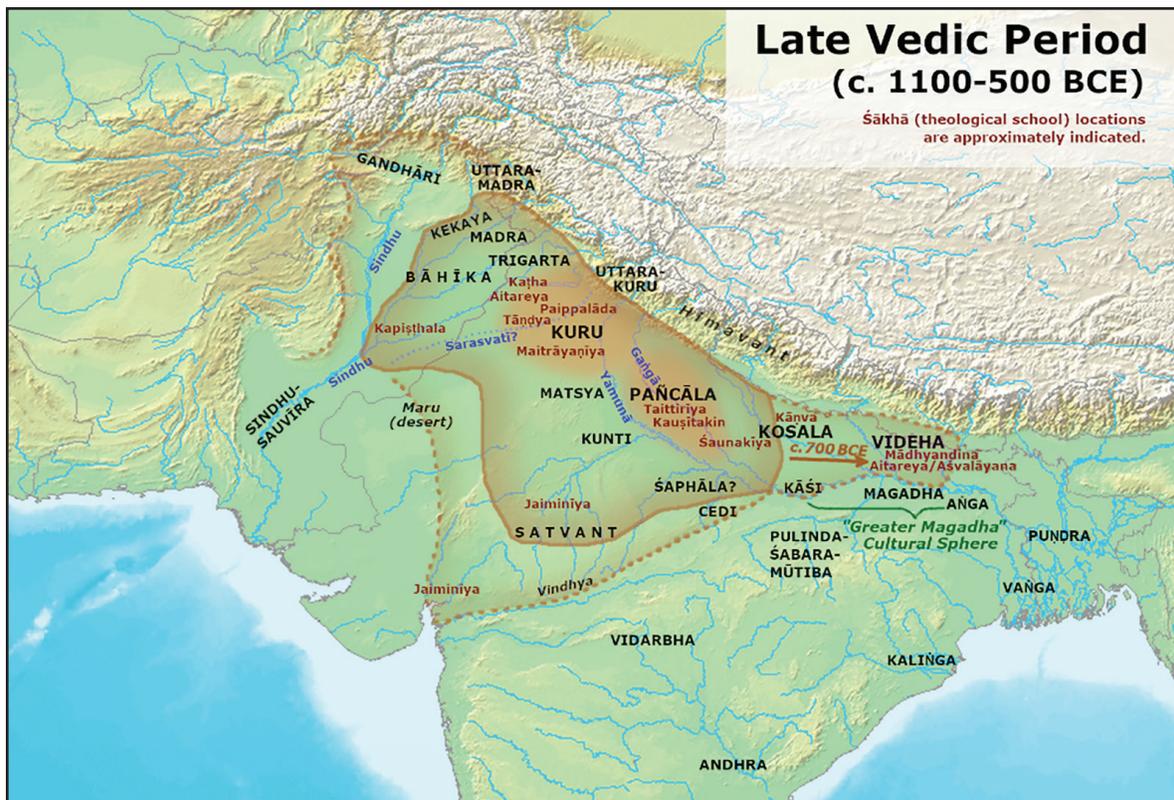
Figure 2: Map illustrating the location of different religious and philosophical schools in the late Vedic period. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Dharma and the Development of Political Thought

Dharma is probably the most significant concept in Indian thought. The word itself has various meanings, including virtue, right action, tradition, and law. It is also the foundation of Indian political and social thought. Each member of society was thought to have his/her own duties to perform (*svardharma*)**.** As all duties are interdependent, performance of one's duties not only fulfills the individual's dharma, but also the dharma of his/her caste, benefiting society as a whole. It was the role of the king to maintain order within society to help each person fulfill their dharma, and more importantly to enforce *varnasramadharma*, the caste system with its laws, duties, and positions.

These ideas were developed in a number of different schools of thought, all of which influenced each other at various times. The **Dharmashastras** were books of law, while the **Nitisaras** dealt with moral philosophy, and the **Arthashastras** focused on government and politics. The Arthashastra school developed sometime before 600 BCE. The term "artha" means wealth or riches, but it can also be interpreted as meaning "a desire for gain" or even "the means to bring order," while shastra means literature or discourse. The term **arthashastra,** which technically means "guide to wealth," is normally translated as "political science."

Kautilya and the *Arthashastra*

One of the most significant political philosophers in ancient India was **Kautilya**, the author of a book called the *Arthashastra.* Several books on arthashastra (government and politics) had been written before Kautilya, but they were all in verse and of interest primarily to other Brahmins. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* was written in simple prose and, therefore, accessible to everyone, particularly to rulers. Kautilya is sometimes equated with **Chanakya**, the Brahmin advisor to **Chandragupta Maurya**, the founder of the Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE), although this identification has been disputed. The **Mauryan Empire** was a highly centralized state that placed almost all of India under its control (see Figure 3).
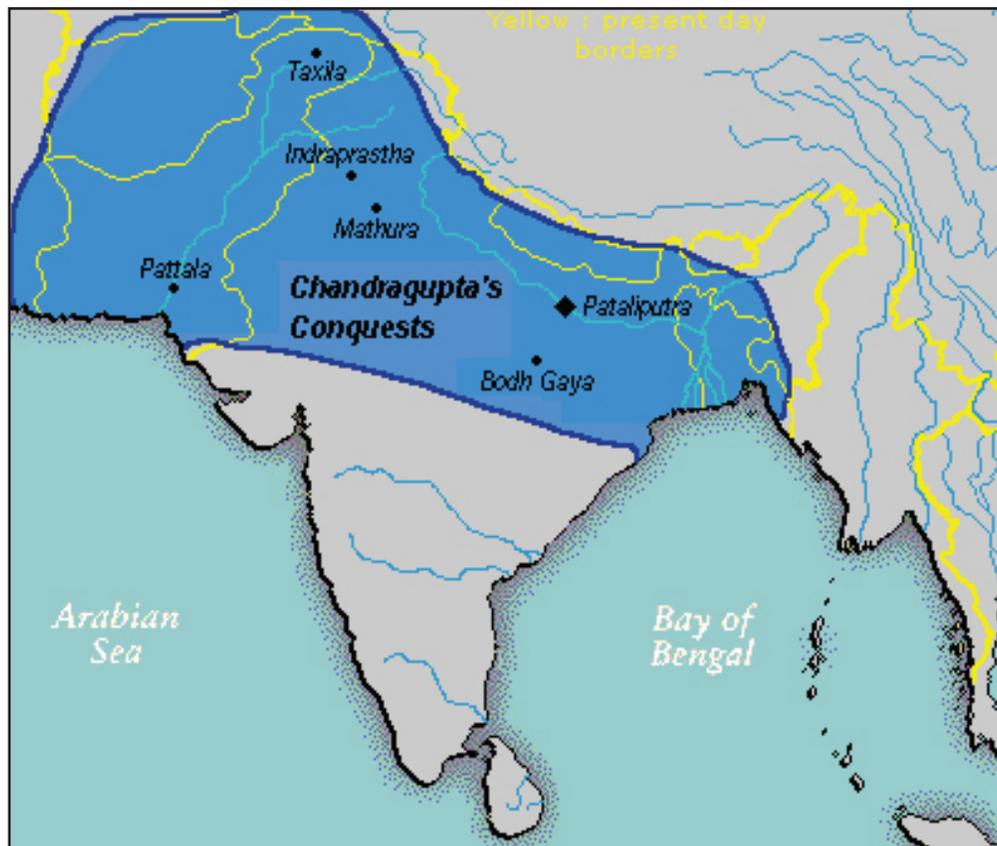
Figure 3 The Mauryan Empire c. 305 BCE. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Kautilyan philosophy was not moralistic but instead examined the dynamics of actual power struggles in an empirical manner. According to the *dharmashastras* (law books), a just ruler should have policies based on honesty and nonviolence. Kautilya argued that while a ruler should be good and honest, it was sometimes necessary to adopt policies that were ethically repugnant in order to maintain the safety and independence of the state. Kautilya believed that so-called unjust war (**kutayuddha**), which involved the use of spies, subversion and assassination, was a necessary tool of statecraft. This has led to allegations that Kautilya was immoral, or at least amoral. However, many historians have argued that he was, in fact, a very moral person who recognized that morally repugnant actions must sometimes be taken for the greater good.

Kautilya was heavily influenced in his ideas by the Carvaka school of philosophy. In contrast with all other Indian philosophical belief systems, the Carvaka school argued that perception is the only reliable source of knowledge. Concepts such as God, the soul, or life after death were irrelevant, because they were beyond perception. Supporters of the Carvaka school regarded wealth (**artha**) and pleasure (**kama**) as their only goals. Moreover, the Carvaka school completely rejected the Hindu social values of dharma and moksha, and it insisted that all means are acceptable in achieving wealth and pleasure, as long as they are successful. Similarly in politics there is never true friendship, but only temporary cooperation inspired by hopes of gain or a common threat. Kautilya did not think in terms of right or wrong, only in terms of what was effective or ineffective when ruling. The main purpose of the monarchy was to uphold the caste system and enable everyone to fulfill their dharma.

Kautilya was writing at a time when the Vedic system of ethics and social cohesion was under enormous threat from Jainism, Buddhism, and other new ideas. The rulers, therefore, had to be above any concept of morality in order to do whatever was necessary to maintain the traditional order. Kautilya encouraged kings

Figure 4. 16th-century copy of Kautilya's "Arthashastra" (rediscovered in 1905). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

to rule well and take care of their people, not because this was the right thing to do, but because it would prevent unhappiness, disaffection, and rebellion. He encouraged rulers to adopt a system of paternalism, or state socialism, in which public works programs employed large numbers of people and benefited society overall. Kautilya also encouraged welfare programs for those who could no longer work.

To ensure internal safety, however, Kautilya also urged rulers to create a national spy network to watch the people, and to assassinate any potential political opponents. This would create a common attitude of mutual suspicion and hostility, thereby preventing any organized opposition. One of Kautilya's most important innovations was that he urged rulers to recruit soldiers from all the varnas (social classes). In this way, the ruler did not have to worry about alienating a single caste. Kautilya argued that all people can be turned into good soldiers with the right training. He also recommended that state factories be established for the manufacture of weapons.

According to Kautilya, the original state of international order was one of complete anarchy, in which might made right. As a result, nations exist in a state of **matsanyaya** ("law of the fishes"), in which the big fish eat the small fish. Kautilya developed the concept of the **mandala** to describe this political environment. Every kingdom was surrounded by other kingdoms, which were its natural enemies. This was because all kingdoms wanted to conquer additional territory in order to protect themselves from aggression. However, Kautilya argued that the enemy kingdoms are themselves surrounded by kingdoms that are hostile to them and potential allies of the original kingdom (i.e. "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"). Kautilya therefore urged rulers to make alliances with the distant kingdoms to destroy their common enemies. Of course, once those enemies were destroyed, the former allies became enemies and their enemies became the new allies. The only way to bring order and peace was for a ruler to become a "world conqueror" (**vijigishy**) and attempt to take control over the whole of India.

The Political Thought of Buddhism and Jainism

A few centuries before Kautilya, sometime around 500 BCE, the Sramana movement had given rise to two new religions, Jainism and Buddhism, with their own system of ethical behavior that influenced their social and political ideas. Both of these movements found their strongest support among the merchants, artisans, and small farmers of the Ganges River valley.

Jainism rejected the authority of the Brahmins and the caste system, regarding everyone as a Vaisya (merchant class). It adopted a policy of asceticism and **ahimsa** (non-violence). Ahimsa not only discouraged

Figure 5. Indian Warfare Relief Sculpture, 2nd Century BCE.
Image via Wikimedia Commons.

warfare, which damaged crops and interfered with trade, but also the use of violence and coercion necessary to maintain political authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, Jainism recognized that government and warfare were not only a reality but often a necessary evil. For the Jains, violence in self-defense was permitted, as was going to war when ordered to do so by a leader. The important issue was mindset. If killing was carried out dispassionately and with the least amount of violence necessary, a person's karma was not damaged by the action. However, violence carried out for self-interest would damage a person's karma because it led only to darkness and evil. Ahimsa (non-violence) was therefore not seen as a goal in itself. Instead, it was intended to help people cultivate restraint and self-control.

Buddhism was founded by a Kshatriya prince named Siddhartha Gautama, who reportedly achieved enlightenment and thereby became the Buddha. According to the Buddha, all life consists of suffering, and this suffering is caused primarily by desire. Buddhists believe that they can achieve *nirvana* (eternal peace) and overcome desire by following the eight-fold path, a guide to proper living and meditation. At the same time, Buddhists recognized the need for government to maintain order while people worked towards achieving nirvana.

Originally, according to Buddha, people had lived in a peaceful state of nature and had been corrupted by the introduction of private property. As people had divided into haves and have-nots, greed and selfishness had evolved. To combat the evils of society, Buddha claimed that the people had chosen a king to rule over them. In this social contract theory of government, the kings were given coercive power and the right of taxation in return for protection and the maintenance of law and order. If, however, the ruler abused his powers, Buddhists argued that the people have a right to overthrow the king and replace him with someone else.

In the Buddhist system of government, the actions of the rulers were supposed to be based on the virtues espoused by the Buddhist *dhamma* (doctrine and teaching), which include benevolence, compassion and equanimity. These teachings emphasized mildness in justice and the importance of establishing peace during wartime or at least trying to limit violence. Rulers were advised to make judgments when they are in a proper state of mind, and to always make sure the punishment was appropriate and fit the crime.
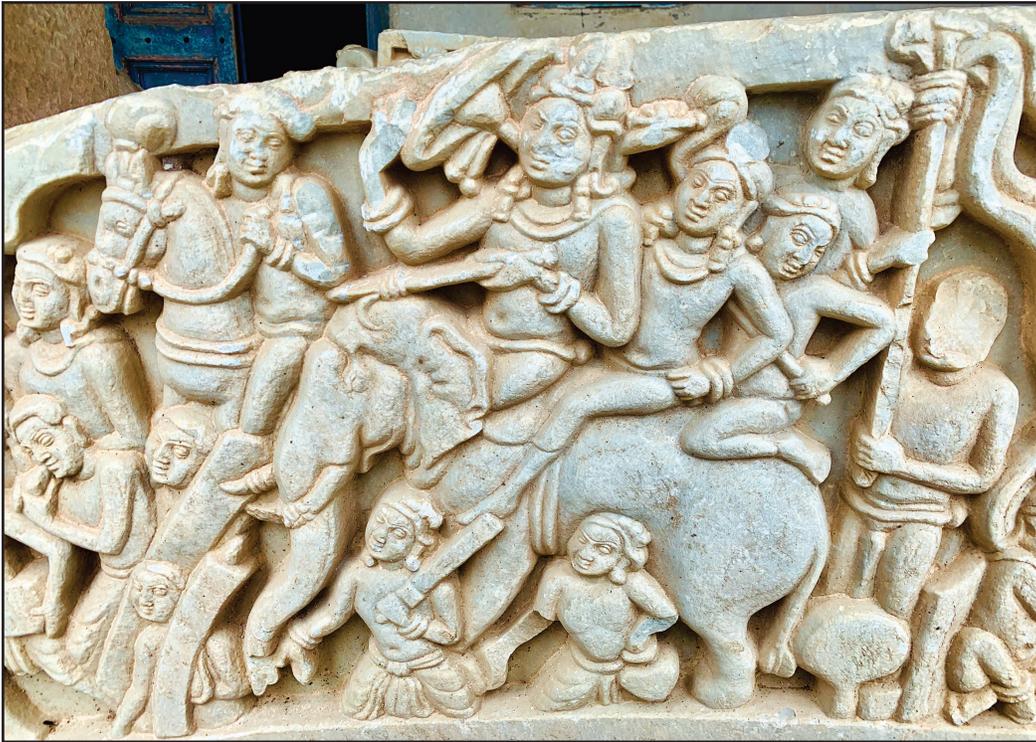
Figure 6. Relief sculpture of a ruler from the Buddhist monastery at Phanigiri Telangana, India. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Buddhists accepted that rulers had to use a certain amount of violence to maintain order within society and deter foreign enemies. Like the Jains, Buddhists believed that warfare was acceptable if the ruler maintained his aversion to violence and killed only out of a sense of compassion associated with the need to protect his people. These ideas strongly influenced the Mauryan emperor Asoka, who erected pillars containing Buddhist teachings throughout his empire (see Figure 7).

Not surprisingly, these two religions were strongly supported by merchants who objected to the sacrifice of valuable cattle by the Brahmins in Vedic ceremonies and to their lower social status in the Vedic caste system. The Jains believed that all people were members of the Vaisya caste, while Buddhists rejected the caste system completely. Moreover, Buddhism encouraged sea voyages and supported moneylending and interest (as long as it was reasonable), because these activities helped spread trade and peaceful co-existence. Buddhism was able to spread rapidly throughout eastern and central Asia, as it followed the trade routes.

The Political Thought of Hinduism

The period from c. 300 BCE to 300 CE saw the development of Brahmanism, an amalgamation of the traditional Vedic religion and the philosophical ideas of the Sramanic movement, which later developed into modern Hinduism. One of the most important works of this period was the dharmashastra known as the *Laws of Manu*. Manu is a legendary figure who first appeared in the Vedas. In traditional Hindu belief, he is regarded as the first man and the

Figure 7. Ashoka's Pillar at Vaishali. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

performer of the first sacrifice, out of which a new human race and society evolved. The *Laws of Manu,* which was written by several anonymous authors between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, reflected the Brahmin reaction against the rise of such religious sects as Buddhism and Jainism, and the loss of their power and influence. The *Laws of Manu* was the first book to treat law in a systematic manner, although it is best known for establishing specific rules of behavior for members of the caste system. In the *Laws of Manu*, the duties and conduct of every individual, male and female, is laid down according to their caste. This book has had enormous influence on Indian society up to the present day.

The authors of the *Laws of Manu* wrote extensively on the subject of rajadharma, the role of government and the ruler. Their views involved a blending of traditional Brahmanical theological ideas with the realism of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. For these authors, the ruler should fulfill his dharma (as a Kshatriya) by engaging in righteous war and by ensuring that each member of his kingdom could perform their duty properly. One aspect of this dharma is to ensure the security of the ruler and his realm. This involved the use of **danda** (coercive force) to ensure stability. At the same time, like Kautilya, they argue that danda must be used appropriately.

Figure 8. Indian ruler, Simhavisnu c. 600 CE. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

In many respects, however, the authors of the *Laws of Manu* differed considerably from Kautilya's views on strategy and warfare. They completely rejected the use of kutayudda (unjust war). Instead, they described a kind of idealistic scenario in which Hindu kings only followed righteous policies and humane warfare. These righteous policies would be defined for the king by the Brahmins, whom the rulers should respect. This meant also accepting the restrictions of the caste system. For example, the authors were firmly against the recruitment of all castes to the army (unlike Kautilya), and they insisted that only Kshatriyas were worthy soldiers.

The *Laws of Manu* also enunciated a series of laws of war, the most important of which drew a sharp contrast between combatants and non-combatants (who were not to be harmed). For example, unarmed enemy soldiers, particularly those fleeing a battle, should never be attacked. When it comes to siege warfare, however, where the laws of battlefield chivalry did not really apply, the authors of the *Laws of Manu* were more willing to use deception, treachery and surprise tactics.

The Brahmins who wrote the *Laws of Manu* followed Kautilya in arguing that diplomacy, rather than warfare, should take the preeminent role in the formulation of grand strategic policy. Unlike Kautilya, however, for these Brahmins, warfare and the military occupied the lowest position within that policy. They argued that the ruler should try to conquer his enemies through conciliation, bribery, and dissension, rather than by war. In particular, because no one can be absolutely confident of victory, these authors urged rulers to avoid warfare and battles whenever possible.

The *Laws of Manu* strongly influenced the *Bhagavad Gita*, a story inserted in the great epic poem, the *Mahabharata*. This poem, which described events that occurred around 1000 BCE, was compiled from older stories between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE. Much of the *Bhagavad Gita* is devoted to the story of an Indian prince named Arjuna and his conversation with Krishna, an *avatar* (human form) of the Hindu god Vishnu (see Figure 9). In the conversation, Krishna convinces Arjuna to overcome his moral qualms about possibly killing his relatives in battle by emphasizing the importance of Arjuna fulfilling his dharma (duty) as a kshatriya (warrior). The importance of this story lies in its emphasis on

Figure 9. 18th-century Indian painting of Krishna and Arjuna. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

dharma as the way to achieve moksha (release). The *Bhagavad Gita* raised the obligations placed on each caste by the *Laws of Manu* to the level of religious duties.

The final version of the *Mahabharata* was developed during the early years of the Gupta empire (c. 320–550 CE), a time when Hinduism fully developed and became the dominant religion in India. One thinker who may have lived during this time was Kamandaka, although like most Indian philosophers it is impossible to know for certain when he lived or to what extent he was influenced by contemporary events.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Kamandaka was heavily influenced by Kautilya. He argued that the principal duty of the king was the welfare and protection of his subjects, and that this was best achieved by having a solvent treasury and a strong army. Kamandaka supported the theory of paternal despotism, in which the just ruler should behave like a father toward his subjects. It was therefore important that the ruler should follow the path of righteousness and should use force carefully. At times the use of **danda** (coercive force) is necessary to ensure dharma (rule of law) within the kingdom, but punishment should always be proportional to the crimes committed. According to Kamendaka, the king who killed wicked people to protect righteousness was not a sinner.

Where Kamandaka differed considerably from Kautilya was in his attitude toward warfare. Kamandaka criticized militarism and considered overdependence on military strength to be dangerous. Victory in war was always uncertain, and because war resulted in mental and physical exhaustion, an intelligent ruler should never indulge in frequent campaigns. A ruler who practiced self-restraint rarely suffered defeat.

When war was inevitable, the ruler should proceed carefully and cautiously. The ruler should use his military assets defensively, and Kamandaka proposed a theory of exhaustion, in which the enemy was gradually worn down through a war of attrition. He also accepted Kautilya's ideas about *kutayuddah* (unjust war), although he argued such tactics should only be used in desperate situations. The king should try and form a grand alliance and then absorb or turn the allies of his enemy.

Figure 10. 12th-century CE sculpture of a chariot. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Kamandaka's views of the military were closer to the idealism of the *Laws of Manu* than Kautilya's more realistic ideas. He believed the army should be based around a core of loyal troops from the Kshatriya caste, whose families had been loyal for generations. He also urged the use of war chariots, which had featured extensively in the Mahabharata, but which were completely outdated by the time of the Gupta Empire (see Figure 10). At the same time, Kamandaka also showed a willingness to try new tactics. He was one of the first military thinkers to develop an early form of combined operations. He urged the establishment of a riverine navy (ships for traveling up rivers) for the transportation of men and materials, as well as for conducting siege operations on enemy forts located near riverbanks.

Afterword

There have been many other works of political philosophers since the days of Kamendaka, such as the Sukraniti, and the works of such thinkers as Zia Barani, Rammohan Roy, and Mahatma Gandhi. Nevertheless, the work of these ancient writers has continued to influence people up to the present day. In recent years, the Indian army has launched Project Udbhav to analyze and draw lessons from the works of the ancient philosophers, particularly the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara,* to help it better prepare for future conflicts. More controversially, the *Laws of Manu* have been used for centuries to uphold the traditional Indian caste system and gender relationships. It has come under increasing criticism in recent years from the Dalit community (the former pariahs/untouchables), who still face significant discrimination despite the official abolition of the caste system, and from many Indian women, who argue that it has been used to keep them in a subservient state to men. It is probable that the work of these ancient writers will continue to discussed and debated for years to come.

Although these ancient philosophers lived centuries apart, they all shared certain common characteristics in their thought. They were all fundamentally conservative, their ideas designed to maintain the social order by both promoting the power of the ruler and at the same time circumscribing that power by emphasizing the duty of the rulers to protect the social structure. While Buddhist and Jain scholars emphasized the importance of ethics in maintaining social order, for the Brahmins who developed practically all of the Hindu political ideas, it was the caste system that was at the center of all social, religious, and political life. For the Brahmins, the primary role of the ruler was to maintain that caste system, by force if necessary.

The ideas expressed by Indian political philosophers were often very practical in nature, reflecting the heavy involvement of Brahmins in the administration of the various kingdoms and empires. Yet, the Brahmin caste always saw itself as slightly separated from the world, intent on its studies of the Vedas. While individual Brahmins would take part in the administration of government, they had no desire to take power, impose a theocracy, or even develop an ethical system of rules for governing. For the Brahmins, their role was solely to ensure that the kings had the support they needed to meet their responsibilities and carry out their rajadharma.

Further Reading

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Glossary

Ahimsa: Non-violence.

Aryans: A nomadic people who took control of northern India around 1500 BCE.

Arthashastras: Books on government and politics.

Asoka: An Indian emperor who converted to Buddhism.

Atman: The Hindu concept of the soul.

Avidya: Hindu belief that ignorance prevents the soul from leaving the material world.

Axial Age: A period that saw the development of new religious and philosophical ideas.

Brahman: The universal spirit in Hinduism.

Brahmins: The priest caste within Aryan society.

Buddha: Siddhartha Gautama, who founded Buddhism.

Buddhism: An Indian religion that tried to end suffering through meditation and ethical conduct.

Carvaka: An Indian philosophy that rejected anything that could not be proven by perception.

Caste: The social groups that divide Indian society.

Chandragupta Maurya: Founder of the Mauryan Empire.

Danda: The use of coercive force to maintain law and order.

Dhamma: The Buddhist teachings of benevolence, compassion, and equanimity.

Dharma: The rules of life in Hinduism.

Dharmashastras: Books of law.

Ganges: A major river in India.

Gupta Empire: A major Indian empire that lasted from 321–550 CE.

Hinduism: An Indian religion in which dharma and karma affect the soul's reincarnation.

Indus: A major river in India and Pakistan.

Jainism: An Indian religion that emphasizes *ahimsa* (non-violence).

Kamendaka: An Indian philosopher who wrote the Nitisara.

Karma: In Hinduism, a person's actions that determine how a person's soul will be reincarnated.

Kautilya: A political philosopher who wrote the Arthashastra.

Kutayuddha: Kautilya's idea of unjust war.

Kshatriyas: The warrior caste in Aryan society.

Laws of Manu: A book that laid out rules of behavior in Hinduism.

Mahabharata: An Indian epic poem.

Mandala: Kautilya's idea that a kingdom is surrounded by potential friends and enemies.

Matsanyaya: The idea that big kingdoms will always try to conquer small kingdoms.

Mauryan Empire: The first empire to unify most of India (321–185 BCE).

Maya: The Hindu concept that the world is an illusion.

Moksha: When a soul reunites with the Brahman spirit.

Monism: The concept of a universal spirit.

Nirvana: The concept of eternal peace in Buddhism.

Nitisaras: Books that dealt with moral philosophy.

Pariahs: The outcasts within Indian society.

Rajadharma: The duties of the king.

Samsara: The Hindu concept of reincarnation.

Sanskrit: The language of the Aryans

Sramana Movement: A movement of philosophical and religious speculation

Sudras: Poor farmers and laborers in Aryan society

Svardharma: The duties of the individual in Hinduism.

Theory of Exhaustion: Kamendaka's idea of wearing down the enemy's forces.

Upanishads: Commentaries on the Vedas that developed many of the concepts of Hinduism.

Vaisyas: Merchants, artisans, and landowners within Aryan society.

Vedas: The sacred writings of the Aryans.

Varnasramadharma: The laws and duties of the caste system.

Teaching Resources

Learning Objective

Students will be able to analyze and evaluate how ancient Indian political and social thought (including the Arthashastra, Laws of Manu, and ideas from Buddhist and Jain traditions) addressed the problem of social order and kingship, and to construct an evidence-based argument on how different thinkers balanced ethics, statecraft, and social structure.

Standards

- Common Core: RH.11-12.1 — Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to source provenance and focus.

- Common Core: RH.11-12.6—Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Suggested Courses

- World History

- Politics & International Relations

- Government

- Religion

Key Concepts and Definitions

- Caste System

- Reincarnation Cycle

- Matsyanyaya (Big Fish Eat Little Fish)

- Kutayuddha (Unjust War)

- Ahimsa (Non-Violence)

- Dharmashastra (legal texts)

- Arthashastra (politics and government)

- Nitisara (moral philosophy)

- Carvaka (realist school of thought)

- Mandala (Kautilya's concept of foreign relations)

- Danda (coercive force)

- Avatar (human form of a Hindu god)

- Theater State

Discussion Questions

1. Is kutayuddha (unjust war) a necessary part of statecraft? Explain.

2. Would Kautilya's *mandala* concept of foreign relations apply to today's world? Explain.

3. Compare and contrast Kautilya's political realism with the idealism found in the Laws of Manu and Kamendaka.

4. How do Buddhism and Jainism's views on violence and government differ from Kautilya's recommendations? Use textual examples to explain how each tradition reconciles the need for political order with its ethical commitments.

External Links and Resources

- **The National Consortium for Teaching About Asia**
  https://www.nctasia.org.
  This website provides workshops, courses and other resources for learning and teaching about Asia.

- **Internet Indian History Sourcebook**
  https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/india/indiasbook.asp.
  This website, hosted by Fordham University, provides numerous links to primary sources on Indian history.

- **World History Encyclopedia**
  https://www.worldhistory.org.
  This website has numerous articles on Indian history and culture.

Classroom Activities and Assessments

Purpose

The following activities are intended for high school World History and/or Government students. They meet the standards of Common Core RH 11-12.1 and RH 11-12.6.

Debate Activity

- Proposal: "That in today's world, the realist approach of Kautilya to foreign affairs is superior to the idealism expressed in the Laws of Manu."

- Instructions: Divide the class into two groups. Have one group develop arguments in favor of the proposal, and one group develop arguments against it.

Think-Pair-Share

Prompt: "Whose views would you trust more to keep your country and community safe?"

Instructions: Students will be provided with two excerpts, one from Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and one from the Laws of Manu. The students will break up into groups of 2 and discuss the prompt and the excerpts. Each group will then share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Excerpt 1:

"He who is possessed of a strong army, who has succeeded in his intrigues, and who has applied remedies against dangers may undertake an open fight, if he has secured a position favourable to himself; otherwise a treacherous fight. He should strike the enemy when the latter's army is under troubles or is furiously attacked; or he who has secured a favourable position may strike the enemy entangled in an unfavourable position. Or he who possesses control over the elements of his own state may, through the aid of the enemy's traitors, enemies and inimical wild tribes, make a false impression of his own defeat on the mind of the enemy who is entrenched in a favourable position, and having thus dragged the enemy into an unfavourable position, he may strike the latter…."

Source: R. Shamasastry (translator). *Kautilya's Arthashastra*. (Government Press, Bangalore, 1915), p. 525.

Excerpt 2:

Let him make every effort to secure a hillfort, for amongst all those (fortresses mentioned) a hillfort is distinguished by many superior qualities…One bowman, placed on a rampart, is a match in battle for one hundred (foes), one hundred for ten thousand…Let that (fort) be well supplied with weapons, money, grain, and beasts of burden…with artisans, with engines, with fodder, and with water…Not to turn back in battle to protect the people, to honour the Brahmanas [Brahmins] is the best means for a king to secure happiness. Those kings who seeking to slay each other in battle, fight with the utmost exertion and do not turn back, go to heaven. When he fights with his foes in battle, let him not strike with weapons concealed (in wood), not with (such as are) barbed, poisoned, or the points of which are blazing with fire. Let him not strike one who (in flight) has climbed on an eminence, nor a eunuch, nor one who joins the palms of his hands (in supplication), nor one who (flees) with flying hair, nor one who sits down, nor one who says "I am thine."

Source: Source: G. Buhler. *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1886), pp. 227–230.

Document Based Question (DBQ)

Students will write a structured DBQ essay (600–800 words) using the provided primary- and secondary-source excerpts (selected passages from the *Arthashastra*, the *Laws of Manu*, the *Nitisara*, and a modern historian's analysis). The essay must: (1) develop a thesis that addresses the different perspectives on kingship developed by ancient Indian philosophers; (2) use at least five pieces of textual evidence (quotations or accurate paraphrases) to support the claims; (3) explain how social structure (caste, dharma) shaped political recommendations; and (4) evaluate historical significance or lasting influence of these ideas.

Rubric: thesis (10 pts), use of evidence (20 pts), analysis & synthesis (20 pts), contextualization (10 pts.), organization and clarity (10 pts), citation & accuracy (10 pts), mechanics (10 pts)

Excerpt 1:

"…In virtue of his power to uphold the observance of the respective duties of the four castes and of the four divisions of religious life, and in virtue of his power to guard against the violation of the Dharmas, the king is the fountain of justice….Sacred law (Dharma), evidence (Vyavahara), history (Charitra) and edicts of kings (Rajasasana) are the four legs of Law. Of these four in order, the later ais superior to the one previously named…As the duty of a king consists in protecting his subjects with justice, its observance leads him to heaven. He who does not protect his people or upsets the social order wields his royal sceptre (danda) in vain…."

Source: R. Shamasastry (translator). *Kautilya's Arthashastra.* (Government Press, Bangalore, 1915), pp. 217–218.

Excerpt 2:

"He who is possessed of a strong army, who has succeeded in his intrigues, and who has applied remedies against dangers may undertake an open fight, if he has secured a position favourable to himself; otherwise a treacherous fight.

He should strike the enemy when the latter's army is under troubles or is furiously attacked; or he who has secured a favourable position may strike the enemy entangled in an unfavourable position. Or he who possesses control over the elements of his own state may, through the aid of the enemy's traitors, enemies and inimical wild tribes, make a false impression of his own defeat on the mind of the enemy who is entrenched in a favourable position, and having thus dragged the enemy into an unfavourable position, he may strike the latter…."

Source: R. Shamasastry (translator). *Kautilya's Arthashastra.* (Government Press, Bangalore, 1915), p. 525.

Excerpt 3:

"Having fully considered the time and the place (of the offence), the strength and the knowledge (of the offender), let him [the king] justly inflict that (punishment) on men who act unjustly…Punishment alone governs all created beings, punishment alone protects them, punishment watches over them while they sleep; the wise declare punishment (to be identical with) the law. If (punishment) is properly inflicted after (due) consideration, it makes all people happy; but inflicted without consideration, it destroys everything. If the king did not, without tiring, inflict punishment on those worthy to be punished, the stronger would roast the weaker, like fish on a spit…"

Source: G. Buhler. *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries.* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1886), pp. 218–219.

Excerpt 4:

Let him make every effort to secure a hillfort, for amongst all those (fortresses mentioned) a hillfort is distinguished by many superior qualities…One bowman, placed on a rampart, is a match in battle for one hundred (foes), one hundred for ten thousand…Let that (fort) be well supplied with weapons, money, grain, and beasts of burden…with artisans, with engines, with fodder, and with water…

Not to turn back in battle to protect the people, to honour the Brahmanas [Brahmins] is the best means for a king to secure happiness. Those kings who seeking to slay each other in battle, fight with the utmost exertion and do not turn back, go to heaven. When he fights with his foes in battle, let him not strike with weapons concealed (in wood), not with (such as are) barbed, poisoned, or the points of which are blazing with fire. Let him not strike one who (in flight) has climbed on an eminence, nor a eunuch, nor one who joins the palms of his hands (in supplication), nor one who (flees) with flying hair, nor one who sits down, nor one who says "I am thine."

Source: G. Buhler. *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries.* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1886), pp. 227–230.

Excerpt 5:

Just as an expert farmer intent on reaping a rich harvest secures his field of crop by paling it with thorny plants and protects it by freely using the cudgel against thieves and beasts that come to destroy it, so should a monarch by the infliction of meet chastisements protect his own kingdom against thieves, depredators, enemies… Inflicting punishments heavier than the offences, a king terrifies his subjects, whilst dealing out lighter ones, he is held in contempt by them. Therefore a monarch should impartially mete out chastisements proportionate to the offences

Dutt, Manmatha Nath (ed.). *Kamandakiya Nitisara or The Elements of Polity (In English).* (Calcutta, H.C. Dass, 1896), pp. 60–61 & p. 66.

Excerpt 6:

When he finds his own Prakriti Mandala [subjects of the kingdom] swelling in prosperity and very loyal to him, and that of his enemy in the reverse condition, then may he embark upon war. Territory, allies and wealth, these are the fruits of war; when by war the gain of these three is certain, then only may it be hazarded Wealth is desirable, allies are more desirable, and lastly, acquisition of territory is most desirable. All-round prosperity is the outcome of territorial possessions, and friends and allies come in the train of prosperity. Against an adversary equally prosperous, a prudent king should employ the expedients of policy.

Dutt, Manmatha Nath (ed.). *Kamandakiya Nitisara or The Elements of Polity (In English).* (Calcutta, H.C. Dass, 1896), p. 145.

Excerpt 7:

The restraining or checking function of punishment seems to be the predominant note of the Hindu theorists…The doctrine of danda itself is mainly based on it, implying check to such an extent as to rule out the repetition of criminal acts that is, to stop evil in favour of the good… The restraining principle is evidently connected with protection which is the prime condition of the social application of danda. In fact, danda is for protection…It is legal in its character, having the limitations set by law as its own starting point.

Ganguly, J.N.C. "Hindu Theories of Punishment." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 8, no. 1 (1926), p. 80.

An Introduction to Ancient Indian Political and Social Thought (c. 1500 BCE–550 CE)

Condensed Version for High School Use

If there is insufficient time for students to read the full version of the article by Edward O'Mahony from *Education About Asia* (Volume 29:1, Spring 2026), teachers can use the following excerpt to provide students with the key ideas of Kautilya, probably the greatest of India's political philosophers.

Kautilya and the *Arthashastra*

One of the most significant political philosophers in ancient India was **Kautilya**, the author of a book called the ***Arthashastra.*** Several books on arthashastra (government and politics) had been written before Kautilya, but they were all in verse and of interest primarily to other Brahmins. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* was written in simple prose and, therefore, accessible to everyone, particularly to rulers. Kautilya is sometimes equated with **Chanakya**, the Brahmin advisor to **Chandragupta Maurya**, the founder of the Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE), although this identification has been disputed. The **Mauryan Empire** was a highly centralized state that placed almost all of India under its control (see Figure 1).

Kautilyan philosophy was not moralistic but instead examined the dynamics of actual power struggles in an empirical manner. According to the *dharmashastras* (law books), a just ruler should have policies based on honesty and nonviolence. Kautilya argued that while a ruler should be good and honest, it was
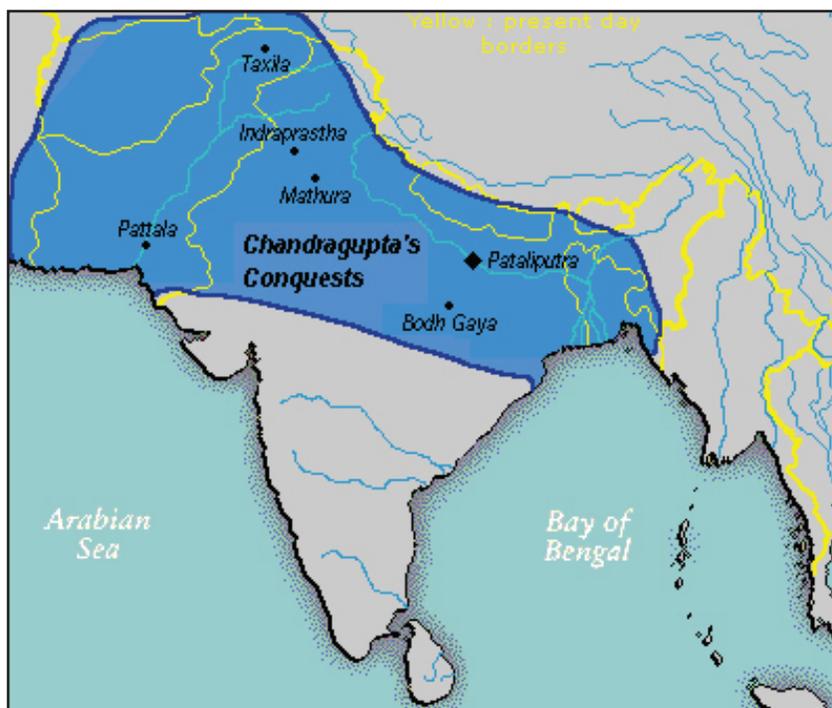

Figure 1. The Mauryan Empire c. 305 BCE. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2. 16th-century copy of Kautilya's "Arthashastra"
(rediscovered in 1905). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

sometimes necessary to adopt policies that were ethically repugnant in order to maintain the safety and independence of the state. Kautilya believed that so-called unjust war (**kutayuddha**), which involved the use of spies, subversion and assassination, was a necessary tool of statecraft. This has led to allegations that Kautilya was immoral, or at least amoral. However, many historians have argued that he was, in fact, a very moral person who recognized that morally repugnant actions must sometimes be taken for the greater good.

Kautilya was heavily influenced in his ideas by the **Carvaka school** of philosophy. In contrast with all other Indian philosophical belief systems, the Carvaka school argued that perception is the only reliable source of knowledge. Concepts such as God, the soul, or life after death were irrelevant, because they were beyond perception. Supporters of the Carvaka school regarded wealth (*artha*) and pleasure (*kama*) as their only goals. Moreover, the Carvaka school completely rejected the Hindu social values of dharma and moksha, and it insisted that all means are acceptable in achieving wealth and pleasure, as long as they are successful. Similarly in politics there is never true friendship, but only temporary cooperation inspired by hopes of gain or a common threat. Kautilya did not think in terms of right or wrong, only in terms of what was effective or ineffective when ruling. The main purpose of the monarchy was to uphold the caste system and enable everyone to fulfill their dharma.

Kautilya was writing at a time when the Vedic system of ethics and social cohesion was under enormous threat from Jainism, Buddhism, and other new ideas. The rulers, therefore, had to be above any concept of morality in order to do whatever was necessary to maintain the traditional order. Kautilya encouraged kings to rule well and take care of their people, not because this was the right thing to do, but because it would prevent unhappiness, disaffection, and rebellion. He encouraged rulers to adopt a system of paternalism, or state socialism, in which public works programs employed large numbers of people and benefited society overall. Kautilya also encouraged welfare programs for those who could no longer work.

To ensure internal safety, however, Kautilya also urged rulers to create a national spy network to watch the people, and to assassinate any potential political opponents. This would create a common attitude of mutual suspicion and hostility, thereby preventing any organized opposition. One of Kautilya's most important innovations was that he urged rulers to recruit soldiers from all the varnas (social classes). In this way, the ruler did not have to worry about alienating a single caste. Kautilya argued that all people can be turned into good soldiers with the right training. He also recommended that state factories be established for the manufacture of weapons.

According to Kautilya, the original state of international order was one of complete anarchy, in which might made right. As a result, nations exist in a state of **matsanyaya** ("law of the fishes"), in which the big

Figure 3. Indian Warfare Relief Sculpture, 2nd Century BCE.
Image via Wikimedia Commons.

fish eat the small fish. Kautilya developed the concept of the **mandala** to describe this political environment. Every kingdom was surrounded by other kingdoms, which were its natural enemies. This was because all kingdoms wanted to conquer additional territory in order to protect themselves from aggression. However, Kautilya argued that the enemy kingdoms are themselves surrounded by kingdoms that are hostile to them and potential allies of the original kingdom (i.e. "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"). Kautilya therefore urged rulers to make alliances with the distant kingdoms to destroy their common enemies. Of course, once those enemies were destroyed, the former allies became enemies and their enemies became the new allies. The only way to bring order and peace was for a ruler to become a "world conqueror" (*vijigishy*) and attempt to take control over the whole of India.

Kautilya and the *Arthashastra*: Ancient Indian Political Philosophy Assessment

1. *Who was Kautilya and what was his significant contribution to ancient Indian political thought?*

   a. A military general who wrote poetry about warfare
   b. The author of the Arthashastra, a book on government and politics
   c. A Buddhist monk who challenged the caste system
   d. The founder of the Mauryan Empire

2. *How did Kautilya's Arthashastra differ from previous works on the same subject?*

   a. It was the first book to discuss political philosophy in India
   b. It was written in Sanskrit verse for educated Brahmins only
   c. It was written in simple prose making it accessible to rulers and common people
   d. It focused exclusively on religious aspects of governance

3. *What philosophical school heavily influenced Kautilya's political ideas?*

   a. Buddhism
   b. Jainism
   c. Vedanta
   d. Carvaka

4. *According to the passage, what was Kautilya's view on the use of morally questionable tactics in statecraft?*

    a. He rejected them entirely as contrary to dharma
    b. He believed they were sometimes necessary for the safety of the state
    c. He advocated using them only against foreign enemies
    d. He considered them appropriate only for lower castes

5. *What concept did Kautilya develop to describe the political environment surrounding kingdoms?*

    a. Matsanyaya
    b. Kutayuddha
    c. Mandala
    d. Vijigishy

6. *What was the main purpose of monarchy according to Kautilya?*

    a. To uphold the caste system and enable everyone to fulfill their dharma
    b. To expand territory through constant warfare
    c. To promote Buddhism throughout India
    d. To establish a democratic system of governance

7. *How did Kautilya recommend rulers handle military recruitment?*

    a. Recruit only from the Kshatriya warrior caste
    b. Hire foreign mercenaries to prevent internal rebellions
    c. Create a small elite force of personal bodyguards
    d. Recruit soldiers from all the varnas (castes)

8. *What did Kautilya call the anarchic state of international order where "big fish eat small fish"?*

    a. Vijigishy
    b. Mandala
    c. Matsanyaya
    d. Kutayuddha

9. *Why did Kautilya encourage rulers to implement public works programs?*

    a. To fulfill religious obligations
    b. To prevent unhappiness, disaffection, and rebellions
    c. To demonstrate military power to neighboring kingdoms
    d. To provide employment exclusively for Brahmins

10. *What was Kautilya's ultimate solution for bringing order and peace to the political landscape?*

    a. Forming permanent alliances with neighboring kingdoms
    b. Establishing a democratic government with elected officials
    c. Implementing strict adherence to religious principles
    d. Having a ruler become a "world conqueror" and control all of India

Answer Key

1. B	3. D	5. C	7. D	9. B
2. C	4. B	6. A	8. C	10. D

EDUCATION ABOUT **ASIA**
TEACHING RESOURCE JOURNAL

An Introduction to Ancient Indian Political and Social Thought (c. 1500 BCE–550 CE)

Middle/High School School Version

This is a shorter and easier-to-read version of *An Introduction to Ancient Indian Political and Social Thought (c. 1500 BCE–550 CE)* by Edward O'Mahony from *Education About Asia* (Volume 29:1, Spring 2026) intended for middle and high school students. Questions and a fun activity can be found at the end of the article.

Political Thought in Ancient India

Ancient India is well known for its many religions, which included Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. During this time, Indian philosophers also developed ideas about government and society. Around 1500 BCE, a nomadic people known as the **Aryans** took control of the Indus River valley and later the plains along the Ganges River. The Aryans divided into many small kingdoms, which were constantly at war with each other. The great Indian epic poem, the **Mahabharata**, tells the story of one such war. The Aryans also created a social structure known as the **caste** structure. At the top were the priests, known as the **Brahmins**. The second level were the warriors. The third level were merchants and artisans, while the bottom level were peasants who worked the land. Another group, called the **pariahs** or outcasts, did ritually unclean work, such as picking up animal dung and burning corpses. The caste system later became part of **Hinduism**.

The Hindus believe that a universal spirit called the **Brahman** created the universe. Each living thing had a soul that was trying to return to the Brahman, but this was difficult because of an attachment to this world. As a result, when living things died, their souls were reincarnated in new living bodies. Hindus believe that a person's actions in this world, called **karma**, determine where the soul will be reincarnated. Good karma, caused by doing the right things, leads to reincarnation in a higher caste. To get good karma, Hindus must follow their **dharma**, a set of rules that regulates how each member of a caste is supposed to behave. Eventually, if a person leads a very good life according to his or her dharma, they will have an opportunity to achieve **moksha** (liberation), in which their soul finally merges with the universal spirit Brahman.

Aryan society, therefore, developed into a system in which everyone had their place, and

Figure 1. Map of the Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta Maurya. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2. 16th-century copy of Kautilya's "Arthashastra" (rediscovered in 1905). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

everyone was dependent on others to ensure that society could function. This interdependence led to a great fear of societal breakdown and anarchy. Kings were necessary to maintain order, and many Indian philosophers focused on how to make monarchies more effective. In particular, they focused on how to ensure a king could best meet his duties and obligations, a concept known as **rajadharma.** One of the first of the philosophers to address this topic was **Kautilya,** who many believe was the chief advisor to Chandragupta Maurya, the man who created the Mauryan Empire in 322 BCE (see Figure 1).

Kautilya wrote the *Arthashastra*, a book about how to run a government. He argued that the main purpose of the monarchy was to uphold the caste system and enable everyone to fulfill their dharma. According to Kautilya, the king should have absolute power, but he should also act like a father to his people. He should ensure that everyone is taken care of by providing public works that employ many people and serve the community. The king should also provide food and accommodations for the very poor who were unable to work. This would have the added benefit of keeping most of the people loyal. Although Kautilya believed a ruler should be good and honest, he also said that it was sometimes necessary to adopt policies that were morally bad in order to maintain the safety and independence of the state. Kautilya argued that so-called unjust war (**kutayuddha**), which involved the use of spies and assassination, was a necessary tool of statecraft. He believed that kings faced dangers from within the kingdom and from other countries. Kautilya argued that the king should use spies (and assassination) against any threat, including from his own people.
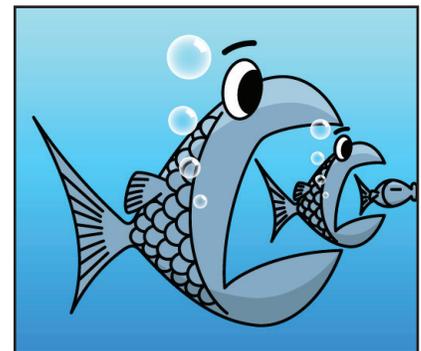

Figure 3. The law of the fishes. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

According to Kautilya, the original state of international order was one of complete anarchy, in which might was right. As a result, nations exist in a state of **matsanyaya** ("law of the fishes"), in which the big fish eat the small fish (see Figure 3). Kautilya developed the concept of the **mandala** to describe this political environment. Every kingdom was surrounded by other kingdoms, which were its natural enemies. This was because all kingdoms wanted to conquer additional territory in order to protect themselves from aggression. However, Kautilya argued that the enemy kingdoms are themselves surrounded by kingdoms that are hostile to them and potential allies of the original kingdom (i.e. "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"). Kautilya therefore urged rulers to make alliances with the distant kingdoms to destroy their common enemies. In order to create large enough armies to fight these wars. Kautilya argued that men should be recruited from all the castes, not just the warrior caste. Moreover, he wanted the government to create its own armories to produce weapons for the troops.

Many Indian philosophers were influenced by Kautilya, although they did not always agree with him. Both the followers of **Jainism** and **Buddhism** rejected the caste system and the need for constant warfare. Jains believe in **ahimsa** (non-violence), in which they try to minimize harm to all living beings. They follow teachings that emphasize self-denial while they try to purify their souls to achieve moksha (release). The Buddhists adopted the teachings of the **Buddha** (Siddhartha Gautama), who taught that all life consists of suffering, and this suffering is caused primarily by desire (see Figure 4). Buddhists believe that they can achieve **nirvana** (eternal peace) and overcome desire by following the eight-fold path, a guide to proper living and meditation. Both Jains and Buddhists believed kings had to maintain order and protect their kingdoms so that people could live their lives in peace. For that reason, they both accepted that kings could use limited violence to protect their people. However, if a king used violence to gain wealth or power for themselves, then he would be committing a sin, and Buddhists believed that the people would then have the right to overthrow him.

The emperor **Asoka** was heavily influenced by Buddhism. Asoka had conquered the kingdom of Kalinga, the last major kingdom in India. Asoka was so disgusted by all the deaths that he converted to Buddhism. He ruled following Buddhist teachings, which emphasized taking care of the people. Asoka built hostels for travelers, hospitals for the sick, planted roadside trees to provide shade, and dug wells to improve public health. He also supported charities that helped the poor and encouraged religious toleration. Asoka built pillars throughout his empire that contained messages encouraging people to lead good lives (see Figure 5). He also sent out missionaries to spread Buddhism in other countries.
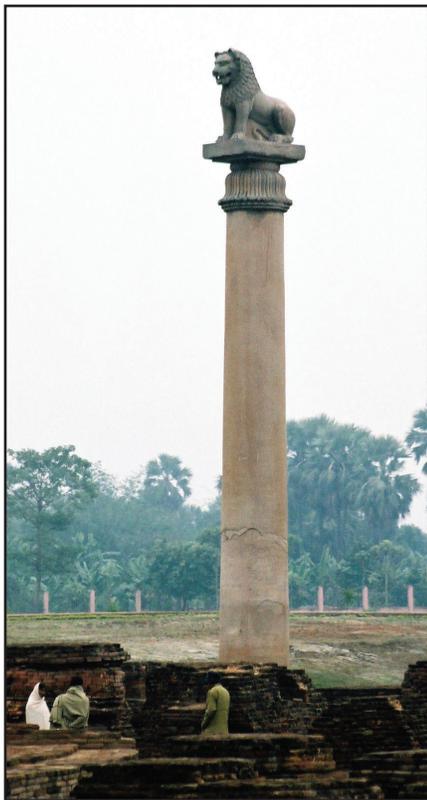

Figure 4. Statue of Buddha. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

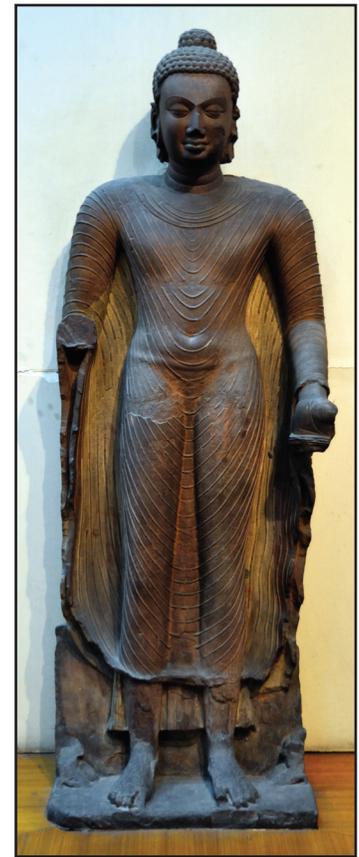Figure 5. Ashoka's Pillar at Vaishali. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

The Mauryan Empire collapsed in 185 BCE. Many rival kingdoms developed throughout India over the next few centuries. During this time, a group of Brahmins wrote **_The Laws of Manu._** The authors' ideas reflected a desire for a perfect world. They laid down the rules of the caste society, so that everyone knew their religious and social duties. The authors agreed a lot with Kautilya. They argued that it was the king's duty to make his kingdom larger and more powerful, because this was his dharma. Unlike Kautilya, however, the authors of "The Laws of Manu" argued that kings must always behave honorably, particularly in battle. It contained the first rules of warfare in India, and it emphasized that civilians must never be harmed, and unarmed soldiers should not be killed.

It was not until 320 CE that a new empire unified most of India (see Figure 6). The Gupta Empire (320-550 CE), which was founded by Chandragupta I, is often regarded as India's golden age. One of the greatest thinkers of this era was Kamendaka, the author of the Nitisara, a book on moral philosophy. Kamendaka agreed with Kautilya that the king should have absolute power, but that he should behave like a father to his people. He disagreed, however, about warfare.

Figure 6. The Gupta Empire. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Kamendaka argued that kings should follow the path of righteousness and should use force carefully, so that punishments were proportional to the crimes that were committed. Kamandaka criticized militarism and considered overdependence on military strength to be dangerous. Victory in war was always uncertain, and because war resulted in mental and physical exhaustion, an intelligent ruler should never indulge in frequent wars. A ruler who practiced self-restraint rarely suffered defeat.

When war was inevitable, the ruler should proceed carefully and cautiously. The ruler should use his military assets defensively, placing them in forts and other strongholds. Kamandaka proposed a **theory of exhaustion**, in which the enemy was gradually worn down through a war of attrition. In this kind of war, the enemy's forces would be gradually worn out attacking defenses, until they were forced to retreat. Kamandaka accepted Kautilya's ideas about unjust war, but he argued such tactics should only be used in desperate situations. Instead, the king should use diplomacy to try and form a grand alliance with other kingdoms to defeat the enemy. At the same time, Kamandaka also showed a willingness to try new tactics. He was one of the first military thinkers to develop an early form of combined operations. He urged the establishment of a river navy, in which a ruler would use boats to transport soldiers and supplies to forts that were under siege, or to attack the supplies of the enemy forces. The ideas of Kautilya, Kamendaka and the authors of the "Laws of Manu" have continued to influence Indian society up until the present day.

Questions:

1. What were the four levels of the Aryan caste system? Who were the pariahs?
2. What was the relationship between dharma, karma, and moksha?
3. According to Kautilya, how was a king supposed to treat his people?
4. What was kutayuddha, and who should it be used against?

5. What was matsanyaya? According to Kautilya, how should kings deal with other kingdoms?
6. How did Jains and Buddhists think kings should behave?
7. According to the Laws of Manu, how should kings behave?
8. What was Kamendaka's "theory of exhaustion?"

Project

Create your own version of Kautilya's mandala. Draw your kingdom in the center of a blank piece of paper. Surround your kingdom with lots of other kingdoms. Work with a partner to figure out who your friends and enemies would be. What should you do to keep your people happy, so that there are no rebellions. At the same time, what do you need to do to defend yourself from your enemies and try and conquer them.

Glossary

Ahimsa: Non-violence

Aryans: A nomadic people who took control of northern India around 1500 BCE.

Asoka: An Indian emperor who converted to Buddhism.

Brahman: The universal spirit in Hinduism.

Brahmins: The priest caste within Hindu society.

Buddha: Siddhartha Gautama, who founded Buddhism.

Buddhism: An Indian religion that tried to end suffering through meditation and ethical conduct.

Caste: The social groups that divide Indian society.

Dharma: The rules of life in Hinduism.

Hinduism: An Indian religion in which dharma and karma affect the soul's reincarnation.

Jainism: An Indian religion that emphasizes ahimsa (non-violence).

Kamendaka: An Indian philosopher who wrote the Nitisara.

Karma: In Hinduism, a person's actions that determine how a person's soul will be reincarnated.

Kautilya: A political philosopher who wrote the Arthashastra.

Kutayuddha: Kautilya's idea of unjust war.

Laws of Manu: A book that laid out rules of behavior in Hinduism.

Mahabharata: An Indian epic poem.

Mandala: Kautilya's idea that a kingdom is surrounded by potential friends and enemies.

Matsanyaya: The idea that big kingdoms will always try to conquer small kingdoms.

Moksha: When a soul reunites with the Brahman spirit.

Nirvana: The concept of eternal peace in Buddhism.

Pariahs: The outcasts within Indian society.

Rajadharma: The duties of the king.

Theory of Exhaustion: Kamendaka's idea of wearing down the enemy's forces.