

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

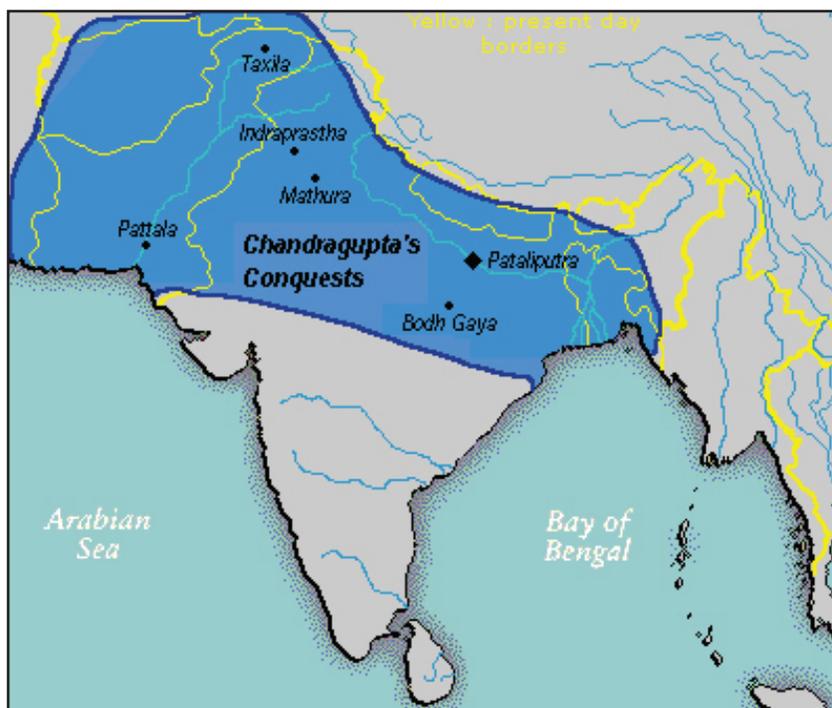


Figure 1. The Mauryan Empire c. 305 BCE. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



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?
- He rejected them entirely as contrary to dharma
 - He believed they were sometimes necessary for the safety of the state
 - He advocated using them only against foreign enemies
 - He considered them appropriate only for lower castes
5. What concept did Kautilya develop to describe the political environment surrounding kingdoms?
- Matsanyaya
 - Kutayuddha
 - Mandala
 - Vijigishy
6. What was the main purpose of monarchy according to Kautilya?
- To uphold the caste system and enable everyone to fulfill their dharma
 - To expand territory through constant warfare
 - To promote Buddhism throughout India
 - To establish a democratic system of governance
7. How did Kautilya recommend rulers handle military recruitment?
- Recruit only from the Kshatriya warrior caste
 - Hire foreign mercenaries to prevent internal rebellions
 - Create a small elite force of personal bodyguards
 - Recruit soldiers from all the varnas (castes)
8. What did Kautilya call the anarchic state of international order where "big fish eat small fish"?
- Vijigishy
 - Mandala
 - Matsanyaya
 - Kutayuddha
9. Why did Kautilya encourage rulers to implement public works programs?
- To fulfill religious obligations
 - To prevent unhappiness, disaffection, and rebellions
 - To demonstrate military power to neighboring kingdoms
 - To provide employment exclusively for Brahmins
10. What was Kautilya's ultimate solution for bringing order and peace to the political landscape?
- Forming permanent alliances with neighboring kingdoms
 - Establishing a democratic government with elected officials
 - Implementing strict adherence to religious principles
 - Having a ruler become a "world conqueror" and control all of India

Answer Key

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