

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.

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.

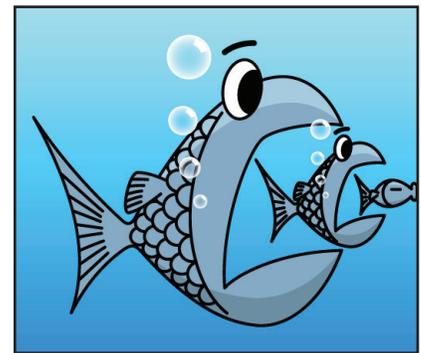


Figure 3. The law of the fishes. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

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.

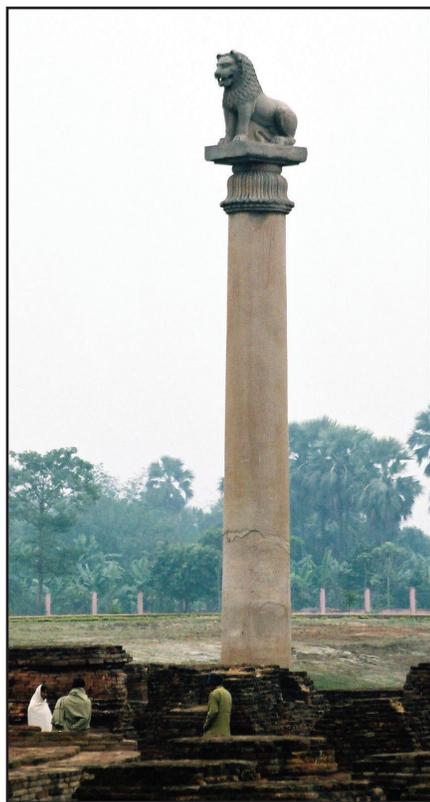


Figure 5. Ashoka's Pillar at Vaishali.
Image via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 4. Statue of Buddha.
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.