

Azim Premji University

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Kauṭilya and his Arthaśāstra

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Kautilya and his *Arthasāstra* (2015-16, Semester I)

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In 1896, nine years before the discovery of the *Kautilya Arthasastra*, Manmath Nath Dutt wrote the following in his introduction to his English translation of the *Kamandakiya Nitisara*.

Admitting their exalted superiority in matters of philosophical and theological speculation, some people of the present generation boldly launch the theory that our literature lacks in works which may serve as a guidance of practical life. To disabuse the popular mind of this perilous misconception, we might safely assert that *Hindu writers* paid no less attention to practical morals and politics. It was Chanakya, the Machiaval [sic] of India who first reformed this Science . . . The author, of the work which is the subject of our translation, was a disciple of *Chanakya who raised the first Maurya king Chandra Gupta on the throne of Pataliputra (B.C. 319.) Tradition fully corroborates this date.* (emphasis added)

If, as Dutt notes a little later, ‘even school boys of India’ knew the Indian science of polity then who was he trying to disabuse? Towards the end of the introduction it becomes clear that his audience was the West, particularly Indologists and the colonial administration. Western scholars such as Max Müller, while acknowledging India’s metaphysical achievements, had claimed that India had ‘no place in the political history of the world.’ Dutt tried to contest such assertions by drawing attention to the pre-colonial Indian tradition of Science of Polity. He further claimed an early date for the best known text of that tradition and tried to demonstrate the practical achievements of that tradition by linking it to the foundation of India’s first large scale empire. Similar claims were voiced with greater conviction after the discovery of the *Kautilya Arthasastra*.

This course will take students through the modern life of an ancient text that was fortuitously discovered at a time when nationalist politics was taking root in India and when Japan’s spectacular victory over Czarist Russia had demolished the myth of the invincibility of the White Man. Unsurprisingly, Kautilya soon emerged as, borrowing from K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar’s glowing tribute, India’s reply to Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Bacon. We can add Sun Tzu and Hobbes to Aiyangar’s list. The text has subsequently been used by a variety of political actors including Nehru, Ambedkar, and Golwalkar. Ambedkar’s observations on the Arthasastra will turn our attention to its marginalisation in the pre-colonial India. Similarly, the engagement with Golwalkar’s selective appropriation of the text will turn our attention to the many lives of Kautilya. The course will use the *Dharmasastras* of Manu and Yajnavalkya, Vatstayayana’s *Kamasutra*, and Kamandaka’s *Nitisara* to locate the *Arthasastra* in the larger body of ancient literature. After examining the ancient and modern avatars of the treatise, the course will examine state, economy, law, and diplomacy from the perspective of the Arthasastra.

The course will introduce students to the rich diversity of the ancient Indian discussions on statecraft, economy, and law and to the problems arising out of anachronistic interpretations of the past to address contemporary political exigencies.

Lecture Plan

PART I

Lecture 1 (Part 1): Nineteenth century debates

Excerpts from Dutt (1896: Introduction) and Max Muller (1859)

Lecture 1 (Part 2): The “discovery” and its immediate aftermath (1905-1933)

Excerpts from Shama Sastry (Fleet’s Foreword, Preface), Law (1914), Gowen (1929), and Banerjee (2012); and excerpts from Thomas (1922), Johnston (1933), and Weber (1946)

Lecture 2-3: Mid- and late 20th Century reception

Excerpts from Ambedkar’s *Who were the Sudras?*, Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*, Dinkar’s *Sanskriti ke Char Adhyay*, Golwalkar’s *Bunch of Thoughts*, and Majumdar’s *The History and Culture of the Indian People (Vol 2)*

Further readings: Rao (1953, chapter 1), Kangle (1986 c, excerpts from introductory chapter), Sternbach (1967), Thapar (2003, excerpts), Boesche (2003), Brekke (2004), McClish (2009, excerpts), Olivelle (2013, Introduction), and Kissinger (2014)

Lecture 4: Literary footprint

Jai Shankar Prasad’s *Chandragupta* and Bharatendu Harishchandra’s translation of *Mudrarakshas*

Lecture 5-6: Audio-visual and other contemporary avatars

Comics: Amar Chitra Katha volumes on Chanakya (1971) and Chandragupta Maurya (1978)

Tele-series: Shyam Benegal’s *Bharat ek khoj* (portions of Episodes 11-12) and Chandraprakash Dwivedi’s *Chanakya* (portions of select episodes) (screening and discussion)

Films: NT Ramarao’s *Chanakya Chandragupta* (1977) (screening and discussion)

Social media sites: Community pages from Facebook

Chakravarti (1988), Chandra (2008), Sreenivas (2010), and Banerjee (2012)

PART II

Lecture 7: Ancient and medieval reception

Excerpts from Shama Sastry (Introduction), Johnston (1929), Kangle (1986a, c), McClish (2009), Sternbach (1981), Derrett (1965), Sarkar (1918, p. 493-494), and Rao and Subrahmanyam (2008)

Lecture 8: Sastras and Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*

Excerpts from Manusmriti and Kamasutra (excerpts), Derrett (1965), McClish (2009), and Olivelle (2013)

Lecture 9: *The Chanakya-Chandragupta Katha*

Excerpts from Trautmann (1971) and McClish (2009)

Lecture 10-11: The structure of the *Arthashastra*

Kangle (1986c), McClish (2009), and Olivelle (2013)

Lecture 12: State in the *Arthashastra*

Kangle (1986c), Scharfe (1993), Trautmann (2012), and Olivelle (2013)

Lecture 13: Economy and law in the *Arthashastra*

Kangle (1986c), Trautmann (2012), Kumar (2012), Olivelle (2013), Sihag (2014)

Lecture 14: Foreign Affairs, Warfare, and Espionage in the *Arthashastra*

Kangle (1986c), Boesche (2003), Brekke (2004), and Olivelle (2013)

Lecture 15: Concluding remarks and revisiting contemporary uses of *Arthashastra*

Tele-serial: Upanisad Ganga (Episodes 10 and 18)

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