



Indian Political Thought

Introduction

Why Indian Political Thought Feels Neglected

When we begin with **comparison vs West**, one thing becomes clear: Indian political thought has received **little recognition** in mainstream scholarship.

- For example, **George Tanham** went so far as to argue that *India has no strategic culture* — reducing it to nothing more than a land of spirituality.
- This reflects what **Edward Said's Orientalism** later exposed: an **ethnocentric attitude** of the West, which judged non-Western cultures through its own narrow lens.

Acknowledgment of Depth

But the story doesn't stop there. Some Western scholars recognised the richness.

- **Max Müller**, for instance, admitted: "*Nowhere in the world has human life been dealt with in such depth as in India.*" This is crucial — it shows that Indian political thought isn't just spiritual musings; it is a **serious engagement with life, society, and politics**.

Prof. V.R. Mehta's Contrast

Now, to really understand the difference, we turn to **Prof. V.R. Mehta**. He draws a sharp contrast between **West and East**:

- The **West**:
 - Thinks in a **dichotomous manner**.
 - Stresses the **atomistic individual, mindless competition**, and often, **amoral politics**.
- The **East** (and India in particular):

- Thinks in **continuity**.
- Links **society and men, ethics and politics**.
- Promotes **cooperation and harmony**.

This is the essence of the **communitarian approach** — where **society is prior to the individual**.

The Essence

So, when we study Indian Political Thought, remember this:

It is not about mystical detachment, nor about power in the amoral sense. Instead, it is about weaving **ethics into politics, individual into society, and harmony into power**.

That is why, even though the West may have overlooked it, Indian political thought offers a **unique civilisational wisdom** that remains deeply relevant today.

Features of Indian Political Thought

Supernatural Elements

The first thing you notice in IPT is its **supernatural elements**.

- Unlike modern Western thought that begins with man as a rational, atomistic being, Indian thought often roots politics in something **transcendental**.
- Its **sources** — the **Upanishads** and the **Vedas** — remind us that politics was never seen in isolation, but as part of a larger cosmic and moral order. So, governance was not just about *who rules whom*, but about aligning with **ṛta (cosmic order)**.

Continuity of Danda and Dharma

Second, IPT shows a deep **continuity of danda and dharma**.



- **Danda** (force, punishment) symbolises the king's coercive power — necessary to maintain order.
- **Dharma**, however, tempers that power with morality, justice, and duty. This balance ensures that the ruler doesn't become a tyrant, and politics doesn't degenerate into pure coercion.

Acceptance of Monarchy

Third, IPT largely **accepts monarchy** as the political form.

- Why? Because in an ancient, diverse, and hierarchical society, a strong king was seen as a unifying force.
- But remember — it wasn't absolute monarchy in the Hobbesian sense. The king was bound by **dharma**, expected to be a **raja rishi** (philosopher-king), not just a despot.

Four-fold Division of Society

Finally, IPT **recognises the four-fold division of society** — the **varna system**.

- Society was imagined in an **organic** way, where every group had its role.
- While today we critique its rigid, oppressive aspects, in classical thought it was seen as a way of ensuring **social harmony and stability**.

The Essence

So, if you want to capture the **features of Indian political thought** in one line:

It is **cosmic in source** (Upanishads, Vedas), **moral in spirit** (dharma), **realist in recognising danda**, **institutional in accepting monarchy**, and **communitarian in its four-fold vision of society**.

Dharmashastra

Think of the **Dharmashastra** as the **Hindu code**

of conduct, a guidebook for how life should be lived.

- Its most prominent text is the **Manusmriti**.
- Here, **dharma** is not just "religion," but literally *that which holds life on earth*. It is the glue of society — ensuring that people live in harmony, fulfilling duties, and respecting order.

And yes, within this system, the **caste system** was justified as a way to **protect the social set up**, believed to guarantee **stability and balance**. (Of course, we critique it today for rigidity, but in classical thought it was seen as a pillar of order.)

The King

Now, who ensures this order? The **king**.

- His role is to **maintain dharma**, and that's why he has **danda** — the power to punish.
- But here's the key: the king is **not the source of dharma**. Unlike Hobbes's sovereign, he is **under dharma**.
- He rules with guidance from the **four purushartha** — **dharma, artha, kama, moksha** — balancing morality, material prosperity, desire, and liberation.

Interestingly, the king is imagined as a **divine personality**, symbolising the **eight gods**. Yet, he is **not a divine-right ruler** — his authority is limited, conditional, accountable to dharma.

The State

Finally, the **state**.

- It is based on a **quasi-contractual theory** — not a purely human contract like in Locke or Rousseau, but a **contract between god and people**.
- The state is thus both **sacred and practical**, born to preserve **order, stability, and justice**.



The Essence

So in **Dharmashastra**, politics is never amoral.

- **Dharma** is the anchor.
- The **king** has **danda** but is bound by dharma, guided by **purushartha**.
- The **state** itself is a sacred **quasi-contract**, linking **god, ruler, and people**.

This makes Indian political thought deeply **ethical, communitarian, and moralistic** — very different from the Western power-centric tradition.

Arthashastra: The Book of Statecraft

If **Dharmashastra** was about *ethics and duty*, the **Arthashastra** is about *power and strategy*.

Written by **Kautilya (Chanakya)**, it is a **book of statecraft**, dealing with both **internal administration** and **foreign policy**, but with a sharp eye on **geopolitics**.

The Art of Acquiring Land

Kautilya teaches the king the **art of acquiring land** — through:

- **Strategies** (diplomacy, alliances, treaties),
- **War** (when necessary).

Why this obsession with land? Because for him, **land is the source of material prosperity and conflict**. Whoever controls land controls wealth, and with wealth, a ruler can secure the kingdom and help people pursue **purushartha** (dharma, artha, kama, moksha).

Material Well-Being is Supreme

Here's the bold difference:

Kautilya says **material well-being is supreme**.

- Why? Because without **artha** (wealth), neither **spiritual goal (moksha)** nor **sensual pleasure (kama)** is possible.

- First secure prosperity, then pursue higher values.

This is a very **pragmatic, realist view** — closer to Machiavelli than to Plato.

The Duty of the King

So, what is the king's duty?

- Not just to sit as a moral guardian, but to **expand land**, ensure prosperity, and protect the state.
- Yet, there is a **continuity with Dharmashastra**:
 - The **origin of the state** is still explained in quasi-contractual terms.
 - The **duties of the king** are bound by responsibility, not absolute freedom.

The Essence

So, while **Dharmashastra** puts dharma at the centre, the **Arthashastra** puts **artha at the centre**.

- Both agree the king has **danda** and duties.
- But Kautilya is brutally **realist**: wealth and land first, higher values later.
- In a sense, **Dharmashastra moralises politics**, while **Arthashastra rationalises politics**.

That's why scholars call Kautilya the **Machiavelli of the East** — though honestly, he was far ahead, because he linked power not just to cunning, but to prosperity and security of the people.

Foreign Policy

War as Kshatriya Dharma

For Kautilya, **war is central to kshatriya dharma**. The king, the **chakravarti samrahta**, is expected to be **expansionist**, not timid. Power grows only when land and influence grow.

Three Types of War

Kautilya was realistic — he classified war into



three forms:

- **Parakram yudhishthira** – *direct war*, open battlefield, armies facing each other.
- **Kutyudh** – *guerrilla war*, fought through deception, ambush, or small attacks.
- **Tushnimyudh** – *proxy war*, silent but dangerous, using others as fronts.

Notice how modern warfare — terrorism, insurgency, proxy conflicts — echoes Kautilya's vision.

Three Types of Victory

Similarly, he explained not all victories are equal:

1. **Dharma vijaya** – *righteous victory*, fought on just grounds.
2. **Lobha vijaya** – *economic victory*, conquest motivated by resources and wealth.
3. **Asur vijaya** – *unfair victory*, won through treachery or brute force.

Kautilya never glorifies war — he classifies it so rulers can be pragmatic.

Psychological Warfare

Like **Sun Tzu**, Kautilya believed that battles are won in the mind before they're won on the ground.

He even suggested spreading fear — warning that “**bad time is coming**” — to weaken the enemy's morale before combat begins.

Six-Fold Policy for Conflict Resolution

Here's the genius of Kautilya: he doesn't see war as the only tool. He designs a **six-fold policy** (*shadgunya*) to deal with enemies:

1. **Shanti** – treaty or peace.
2. **Vigraha** – breaking treaty when needed.
3. **Stationing troops** – to show readiness.

4. **Mobilising troops** – active preparation for war.
5. **Partnership (ally)** – temporary alliances for advantage.
6. **David bhava** – avoiding a **two-front war** by balancing enemies.

This is *realpolitik at its sharpest*: flexibility, strategy, and timing matter more than rigid moral rules.

Interstate Relations

War and the Lion

In interstate relations, Kautilya was blunt: **the relation of war is one where the lion prevails**. Power, not sentiment, determines outcomes. To prove supremacy, kings in ancient India performed rituals like the **ashwamedha yajna** and **rajasuya yajna**. These weren't just religious ceremonies — they were political signals, open challenges to neighbouring rulers: “*Do you dare to stop me?*”

Mandala Sidhanta – The Circle of States

Here comes Kautilya's **masterstroke**: the **mandala theory** (*mandala sidhanta*).

It begins with the **vijigishu** – *the one who aspires for victory*. Every ruler, in his eyes, was a potential conqueror, but success depended on strategy.

He laid down **six principles** to guide the vijigishu:

1. **Pursuit of resources** – wealth and strength are essential for power.
2. **Elimination of enemies** – weaken or finish rivals whenever possible.
3. **Cultivation of allies and providing help** – diplomacy matters as much as armies.
4. **Prudence over foolhardy valour** – wisdom > reckless bravery.



5. **Preference for peace over war** – avoid unnecessary bloodshed; war is costly.
6. **Justice in both victory and defeat** – legitimacy keeps power stable.

The Golden Maxim

Kautilya gives us one of the most famous lines of geopolitics: **“An enemy’s enemy is likely to be a friend, and an enemy’s friend an enemy.”**

This is the essence of balance of power, alliances, and realpolitik — centuries before modern IR scholars like Morgenthau or Waltz!

The Essence

Kautilya shows us that **foreign policy is not about ideals but survival and expansion.**

- War is dharma, but it can be **direct, indirect, or silent.**
- Victory can be **moral, economic, or cunning.**
- A wise king fights **not just with swords, but with psychology, treaties, and alliances.**

That’s why even today, when strategists talk about **deterrence, balance of power, and alliances**, they are echoing the wisdom of the **Arthashastra.**

- Kautilya understood **interstate relations as a jungle** where only the strong survive — the **lion prevails.**
- But he was not reckless — his **mandala theory** was about careful calculation: build allies, crush enemies, prefer peace when wise, and even in victory, ensure **justice.**
- He gave the world the first structured model of **international relations**, echoing in modern diplomacy where countries form alliances not out of friendship but out of **strategic necessity.**

On Corruption

Honey on the Tongue

Kautilya was brutally realistic. He admitted:

“Honey on tongue — it is not possible not to taste it.”

This was his metaphor for corruption. Just like it’s hard to resist honey on your tongue, it’s almost impossible for officials handling money not to be tempted.

The Fish Problem

He compared detecting corruption to finding out **whether a fish has drunk water or not.**

You can see the fish swimming, but you cannot see the water entering its mouth. Similarly, embezzlement is invisible, hidden within official duties.

That’s why he listed **40 ways of embezzlement** — showing that corruption is *not an accident* but a **systematic risk of power.**

Why Corruption is Dangerous

Kautilya warned corruption must be controlled because it:

- Makes the **state weak.**
- Raises questions about the **capacity of the state** to govern.
- Leads to **degradation of morale** among the people.

A corrupt administration is not just inefficient — it’s dangerous, because it erodes trust and legitimacy.

Methods Suggested

Kautilya didn’t stop at diagnosis — he prescribed remedies:

1. **Right-sizing of bureaucracy** – too many officials create leakage; keep it lean.



2. **Security & reward for whistle-blowers** – encourage people to speak up.
3. **Punish the entire chain** – not just the taker, but also the giver and the keeper.
4. **Reward honest officers** – celebrate integrity, not just punish dishonesty.

The Essence

Kautilya was centuries ahead of his time. While modern governance talks about **Lokpal, vigilance commissions, RTI, whistle-blower protection**, Kautilya had already understood both the **inevitability of corruption** and the **need for systemic checks**.

He balanced realism (“honey on tongue...”) with reform (“reward the honest, punish the guilty”), proving that good governance is about *anticipating weaknesses and building safeguards*.

The State: Saptanga Theory

An Organic View of the State

Kautilya and other ancient thinkers saw the state not as a machine, but as a **living organism**.

Just like the human body has organs that must work together, the state has **seven elements (sapt-anga)** — each *independent* yet *interdependent*.

If one weakens, the others suffer. If all flourish, the state becomes powerful.

1. King (Swami)

The most important element.

- Kautilya says: *“In the happiness of subjects lies the happiness of king, in their welfare his own welfare.”*
- Even if forts are weak, or treasury is low, a **wise king** can rescue the state. A reminder that **leadership is the soul** of governance.

2. Amatyas (Ministers)

- They should know the **Veda**, be men of **integrity**, and yes — include **spies**!
- Why? Because kings cannot govern alone. Wise ministers are the king’s eyes and ears. A corrupt or incompetent council weakens even the strongest monarch.

3. Durga (Fort)

- Forts are symbols of **offensive and defensive power**.
- Under the **Mauryas**, forts ensured both security and administration. Without Durga, the state is like a body without skin — exposed to external danger.

4. Janapada (Territory & People)

- The land where the **ordinary citizen lives**.
- Source of **wealth and economic activity**. If Janapada suffers, the whole state collapses — for no king survives without productive subjects.

5. Danda (Army)

- Composed of **Kshatriya and others**, often **hereditary forces**.
- The instrument of law and order, and protection. Danda is the muscle of the state. Without it, law is mere paper.

6. Kosha (Treasury)

- The **lifeblood of the state**, crucial during **calamities**.
- Even the bravest army or wisest king cannot function without money. Kosha is the state’s oxygen — invisible, but indispensable.

7. Mitra (Ally)

- External **allies** balance power.



- No state is ever completely self-sufficient.
Mitra reminds us: *diplomacy is as important as danda.*

The Essence

The **Saptanga Theory** teaches us that power is not one-dimensional.

- A king alone cannot rule without ministers.
- An army cannot fight without treasury.
- A fort is useless without productive citizens.

It's a **holistic view of statecraft**, where every element matters, but the **wise king** ties them together like a thread holding pearls in a necklace.

Pre-Kautilya and Kautilya

Pre-Kautilya Period

- Here, society was guided by **customs and traditions**.
- Think of it like a **minimalist state** — its role was small, almost passive.
- Its job? Just to **facilitate commerce**, ensure trade flows smoothly.
In many ways, this resembled the **early laissez-faire** idea in Europe — “let the society manage itself, let the state not interfere too much.”

So, the state was not the *maker* of rules; it was more like a *night-watchman* keeping order while society governed itself.

Kautilya's Breakthrough

Enter **Kautilya** with his *Arthashastra*. He **redefined the role of state**.

- For him, the **state itself would make its own laws** — not just depend on old customs and traditions.

- His focus shifted from *religious-social norms* to **secular economic activity** and the **structure of the state**.

This was revolutionary: now, the state wasn't just a passive guardian, but an **active architect of order and prosperity**.

Why is this Important?

- **Before Kautilya** → Society led, state followed.
- **With Kautilya** → State leads, society follows.
- This marks a move from **traditionalism** to **rational statecraft**.

The Essence: Kautilya was doing in ancient India what modern thinkers like Hobbes and later European economists did centuries later — He replaced faith in *customs* with faith in a **designed state system**

Kautilya vs Machiavelli

First, the Key Observation

- Kautilya was so blunt and practical that even **Max Weber remarked**: “*Kautilya was more Machiavellian than Machiavelli himself.*”
- Why? Because Kautilya didn't sugarcoat. He gave **harsh advice in explicit terms** — for example, recommending **frequent transfers of officials** to prevent corruption.

Differences

- **Machiavelli**:
 - More **indicative and generic** — he hints, he suggests.
 - Writes in a **dichotomy** (good vs. bad, moral vs. political), but without an elaborate framework.
- **Kautilya**:
 - Gives a **detailed, elaborate structure** of governance, from spies to taxation to



diplomacy.

- His statecraft was like a manual — systematic and precise.

In short: Machiavelli *suggests*, Kautilya *instructs*.

Similarities

Scholars like **Winternitz and Buttazzi** remind us that the **roots of realism** shine in both:

- Both emphasise **statecraft** — the *chakravarti samrahta* (world conqueror) for Kautilya, the *Prince* for Machiavelli.
- Both share **patriotic intent** — strengthen the state above all.
- Both see a **pessimistic view of human nature** — men are *ari* (enemy-like), selfish, corrupt.
- Both stress **material welfare** as the base of politics.
- Both glorify **war and expansionist policy** as natural to power.

The Essence

Think of it like this:

- **Kautilya** is the **engineer of statecraft** — every nut and bolt explained.
- **Machiavelli** is the **philosopher of power** — highlighting the principles without much blueprint.

Yet, both converge on one eternal lesson:
politics is about power, not morality.

PYQ

1. Dharmashastra presents a duty-centric worldview for individuals and communities. Comment. 2024, 15
2. Explain the sources of Ancient Indian Political Thought. 2020, 15
3. Discuss Kautilya's views on the elements of the State. 2019, 15

4. What do you understand by the notion of Statecraft ? Discuss the theory of statecraft as given by Kautilya 2017, 15
5. Examine the significance of Dharma in ancient Indian political thought. 2013, 10
6. Analyse, as per Kautilya, the Saptanga theory of the state. 2013, 10
7. Draw parallels between Arthashastra tradition and the 'Realist' tradition represented by Machiavelli. 2012, 15
8. Compare and contrast Dharmasastra and Arthashastra with reference to State power. 2010, 15
9. Comment on: In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness in their welfare of his welfare (Kautilya). 2007, 20
10. Critically examine the Sapta Prakriti of state as envisaged by Kautilya. 2007, 15
11. Comment on: Of those (officers) the ways of embezzlement are forty (Kautilya). 2005, 15
12. Comment on: Rulership can be successfully carried out (only) with the help of associates: One wheel alone does not turn (Kautilya). 2004, 15
13. Comment on: The main political ideas contained in the Manusmriti. 2003, 20
14. Comment on: Mandal theory. 2003, 20