

Kautilya's Arthashastra and Chanakya Niti

*Pradeep Kumar Gautam**

Traditionally, Kautilya or Vishnugupta, is considered the author of *Arthashastra*. He is also known as Chanakya, the scholar and chief minister who 'destroyed the power of the Nandas and placed Chandragupta Maurya on the throne of Magadha' in the 4th century BC.¹ By the name of Chanakya, he had also authored a text known as *Chanakya Niti*. However, there is no proper understanding in the general public about the seminal work authored by Kautilya such as the *Arthashastra* and *Chanakya Niti*. Unfortunately, the term 'Chanakya' is used as an adjective very loosely in media or public discourse with negative Machiavellian connotations, mainly because of lack of knowledge. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a very different and comprehensive manual and is not the same as *Chanakya Niti*, as is wrongly understood by many. Considering the need to set right a common misunderstanding or confusion about these texts, this commentary aims to throw light on this literature. It first introduces in brief Kautilya's *Arthashastra* followed by an introduction to *Chanakya Niti* and the rigorous contemporary scholarship associated with it. It also features some selected verses from *Chanakya Niti*.

KAUTILYA'S ARTHASHASTRA

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* survived in oral traditions and in fragmentary commentaries till 1905 when a manuscript was discovered which was

* Colonel Pradeep Kumar Gautam (Retd), is a former Research Fellow and Consultant at MP-IDSa for the project 'Indigenous Historical Knowledge'. He is now an Honorary Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies, The USI of India.



published in 1914 in English and other languages. With discovery of more manuscripts, a critical edition was published in 1960s by R.P. Kangle of Bombay University. Another compilation and translation was done by T. Ganapati Sastri.²

It needs to be reiterated that Vishnugupta or Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, was not only celebrated as a king-maker but also regarded as the greatest exponent of realistic policies of governance and of methods of diplomacy.³ Kautilya's principal work *Arthashastra*, means 'science of wealth/power'. It is a fundamental text of political science and political economy consisting of 15 books of about 6,000 sutras in a logical arrangement. It also needs to be noted that for reasons not known, the texts of various schools and predecessors of the *arthashastra* tradition except that of Kautilya are lost. The lost texts being: *Manavas* (school), *Barhaspatyas* (school), *Ausanasas* (school), *Bharadvaja*, *Visalaksa*, *Parasara* (school), *Pisuna*, *Kaunapadanta*, *Vatavyadhi*, *Bahudantiputra* and *Ambhiyah* (school). Kautilya's *Arthashastra* however makes a brief mention of these lost schools and scholars. Kautilya engages with them, mostly to reject and critique them and then gives his own theories and precepts. In other words, Kautilya is the sole editor, innovator and compiler of Indian wisdom and precepts of secular statecraft and political science. Thus, today for *artha*, the only surviving and majestic text is *Arthashastra*, of which Kautilya is the final and supreme version. The text has implicit and explicit concepts and vocabulary on internal governance, foreign relations and grand strategy which seems enduring. Over the last decade, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* has been the focus of study and reflection in many think tanks, universities and also a popular topic for lectures at high-level military training establishments.

CHANAKYA NITI

Besides *Arthashastra*, Chanakya is also associated with *Chanakya Niti*, which is 'a vast collection of aphoristic sayings in Sanskrit... Apart from some philosophical thoughts, these primarily comprise musings on human life and everyday living, with its problems and solutions'.⁴ These sayings are also called 'floating wisdom' mirroring social conditions of ancient times with some verses glorifying patriarchy, elements of Brahmanism and misogyny. Vishwamitra Sharma, in his *Complete Chanakya Neeti* has critiqued and highlighted this aspect alongside the verses in Sanskrit and in English.⁵ It is important to exercise caution

while looking at the context of those times and note that each and every verse or sutra may not be applicable in present times. However, many precepts and aphorisms are enduring and relevant, as discussed in this commentary later.

It is important to understand that 'the adventures of Chanakya and Chandragupta are told in a cycle of tales preserved in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain books'.⁶ Details of these stories feature in some later works in various versions like *The Katha-sarita-sagara* and the drama *Mudrarakshasa*.⁷ A modern re-telling of this story is titled *Chanakya: The Master of Statecraft*, by Deepa Agarwal.⁸ The key is to understand the play *Mudrarakshasa*.

Mudrarakshasa

Fundamentally, the popularity of Chanakya is rooted or anchored in a political-cum-historical play *Mudrarakshasa* (Rakshasa's Ring), a 5th century drama written by Vishakhadatta.⁹ An abridged version of this 'very difficult and complicated'¹⁰ play in seven acts by Charles Drekeimer, is aptly titled as 'The Web of Diplomacy'.¹¹ The central theme of the drama is about two rival masterminds—Chanakya (Kautilya) and Rakshasa (chief minister of deposed Nandas), in which Chanakya wins over Rakshasa by his clever machinations.¹² Ultimately, the erstwhile enemy minister Rakshasa of the vanquished king becomes the prime minister of the victorious Chandragupta Maurya.

The plot of this drama combined at random with cycle of tales preserved in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain books are presented in a number of contemporary television serials, however, they are often twisted out of context for popularity and profits and therefore need to be viewed with care. The present generation hooked on to television and electronic media for entertainment (with knowledge as some incidental by-product) assume that all the knowledge and wisdom in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and *Chanakya Niti* has been presented in these television serials. One example is that of *visha-kanya* (poison-maid), which features in the tales and the drama and also, by default in television serials. Tellingly, *visha-kanya* finds no mention in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.¹³ It also does not feature in the known text of *Chanakya Niti*. Information available on social media and internet is wrongly assumed to be the authentic knowledge. One reason behind this is the steep decline in the reading habits of classical literature. For classical literature, the scholarship of Ludwik Sternbach is a good example, which is discussed next.

LUDWIK STERNBACH ON *CHANAKYA NITI*

Ludwik Sternbach was a Polish-Jew who survived the World War II in India. Ludwik Sternbach's initial work was the path-breaking article 'Indian Wisdom and Its Spread beyond India' in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.¹⁴ He also authored a book *The Spreading of Chanakya's Aphorisms over 'Greater India'*.¹⁵ Sternbach's main work is a multi-volume all-India survey of the *Chanakyaniti* manuscripts, some of which have now been translated into English by Ambassador A.N.D. Haksar.¹⁶ Sternbach studied about 235 manuscripts from all over India of total 2,235 verses, many of which were repetitive.¹⁷ Sternbach's painstaking scholarship needs to be celebrated and complimented in clarifying and classifying the text by Chanakya. He wrote:

Canakya was a name under which individual maxims were brought together in collections of wise sayings... The number of editions and manuscripts of "Canakya's" sayings is immense. No one even knows how many were written, the more so as in India many of them served popular rather than scholarly purposes. Many of them were used as text-books for teaching Sanskrit or became editions so arbitrarily modified that their original model could not be recognized.

All the collections of so-called Canakya's sayings may be divided into six versions:

- (a) the *Vrddhachanakya*, *textus ornatior* version, which is the best known version usually published under the title *Canakya-niti-darpana*;
- (b) the *Vrddhachanakya*, *textus simplicior* version, which is less well-known;
- (c) the *Canakya-niti sastra* version;
- (d) the *Canakya-sara-samgraha* version which is not popular in India and is most commonly known in North-East India and in Nepal;
- (e) the *Laghu-canakya* version;
- (f) the *Canakya-rajya-nitisastra* version. It is not well-known today, but must have been so in the ninth or tenth century, for it was then translated into Tibetan and included in the Tanjur.

When the individual versions of these so-called Canakya's sayings were composed is not known, with the exception of the *Canakya-rajya-nitisastra* version and the *Laghu-canakya* version. The date of the former is the ninth or tenth century at the latest, for it is known

that it was then incorporated in the Tibetan Tanjur, and the date of the latter is the seventh to tenth century, for this text was found among the Eastern Turkestani texts of this period. In general, the collections are of a much later date than the sayings themselves; the sayings are in reality dateless.¹⁸

Due to the recent rigorous research and scholarship of scholar-diplomat A.N.D. Haksar, selected verses of Chanakya translated into simple English are now available in a compact book for the readers.¹⁹ 'The latest, covering the entire compilation, is a work of the Kannadiga Sanskrit scholar A.R. Panchamukhi, with a Hindi translation published in 2016'.²⁰ Haksar has published select verses as follows:

1. *Chanakya Niti Darpana* or *Vridhdha Chanakya*: Mirror of Chanakya Policies or Great Chanakya (best known and most published with several regional scripts).
2. *Vridhdha Chanakya II*: Great Chanakya.
3. *Laghū Chanakya*: Little Chanakya (translated and taken to Europe in Greek translation by an East India Company official in 1825).
4. *Chanakya Niti Shastra*: The Book of Chanakya Policy (mainly in Bengali script with several sayings incorporated in popular Sanskrit Hitopadesa fables).
5. *Chanakya Sara Samgraha*: The Collected Essence of Chanakya (had currency in Nepal and north-east).
6. *Chanakya Rajaniti Shastra*: The Book of Chanakya State Policy (translated into Tibetan and incorporated in Tanjur in 10th–11th century).

In the following section, a few verses from *Chanakya Niti*, translated by A.N.D. Haksar, show the deep philosophical insights and worldly wisdom that form the kernel of *Chanakya Niti*. For the purpose of comparison, some comments are mentioned in parenthesis after the verses.

VERSES OF *CHANAKYA NITI*

1. 'In lands where one gets no respect,
no livelihood, and has no kin,
nor to learning any access,
abjure all staying therein.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 1.8

(This assumes contemporary relevance due to global refugee crisis and migration for various reasons.)

2. 'In times of sickness or bad luck,
in famines and enemy attacks,
at the ruler's door or in the cemetery,
the friend is one who stands by you.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 1.12
(Matches with what a *mitra* or friend should be like in most of the *Shastras*, and emphasised in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and also in the *Panchatantra* which devotes Book II on 'Winning the Friends'.)
3. 'Which family is free of faults,
which person has not suffered disease,
who has not faced adversity,
whose happiness is permanent?' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 3.1
(Similar to Buddha's discourse.)
4. 'For the family, forsake one person,
for the village, forsake the family,
forsake the village for the country,
but for yourself, forsake the world.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 3.10
(Also found in Kamandaka's *Nitishastra* at 9.16.32B and in *Panchatantra*, Book 1, Story 7, 'How the Lion and His Servants Got the Camel Killed', in Patrick Olivelle, *Panchatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom*, translated from original Sanskrit, Oxford University Press, 1997.)
5. 'Spoil him for the first five years,
for the next ten, discipline him,
but once the son becomes sixteen,
treat him like a friend.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 3.18
(Unique to *Chanakya Niti* and for upbringing children even to this day.)
6. 'From fearful famines and epidemics,
from attacks by the enemy,
and from contacts with the wicked,
to stay alive one has to flee.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 3.19
(From attacks by the enemy, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has a similar advice as given in this verse from *Chanakya Niti Darpana*. Sun Tzu also recommends to flee to fight another day in Chapter 3 'Attack by Stratagem', i.e., 3.9: 'If equally matched we can offer

battle; if slightly inferior in number, we can avoid the enemy; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him'.²¹ However, in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* 'fleeing' when attacked by strong king is not found; instead taking shelter with another king is the norm in Book 12 'Concerning Weaker King' in sutras 12.1. 7–9: 'One submissive everywhere lives despairing of life like a ram (strayed) from the herd. And one fighting with only a small army perishes like one plunging in the ocean without a boat. He should, however, act finding shelter with a king superior to him or in an unassailable fort.'

7. 'Truth is my mother, knowledge father,
brother virtue, sister mercy,
my wife is peace, forgiveness my son:
these six are my blood relations.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 12.11
(Unique to *Chanakya Niti*)
8. 'Falling drops of water do,
gradually fill up a pitcher:
such is the way of knowledge too,
also of virtue and of wealth.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 12.20
(Unique to *Chanakya Niti*)
9. 'Do not grieve for what is gone,
nor think about the future,
wise folk act according to
needs of a present nature.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 13.2
(Resembles saying live in the present.)
10. 'Large groups of people, joined together,
can defeat the enemy—
rain on a hut is kept away
by a roof of twigs that you may see.' *Chanakya Niti Darpana*, 14.4
(Unique to *Chanakya Niti*)
11. 'All four Vedas do they know,
and many holy scriptures,
but not their own individual self-
just as the ladle knows not a curry's taste.'
Chanakya Niti Darpana, 15.12
(Akin to Sufi thought and need for Self-Realisation in Indic religions.)
12. 'Gentleness decorates the scholar,
controlled speech the warrior,

patience does this for the wise,
and for the rich, humility,
for ascetics it is self-control,
forgiveness for the powerful,
and for law, being impartial:
all these are due to feelings pure,
the greatest jewel is character.’ *Chanakya Rajaniti Shastra*, 3.57
(Unique to *Chanakya Niti*)

13. ‘Eloquent, and a talker wise,
able to handle opposition,
steadfast, speaking as instructed,
such should an ambassador be.’ *Chanakya Rajaniti Shastra* 5.8
(What a diplomat needs to be and his duties and functions are given
in great detail in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, Book 1, Chapter 16, Section
12 ‘Function of the Envoy’. This verse sums it up well.)

14. ‘What can and will orators do
when there are no listeners?
They are like a launderer
in a land of naked mendicants.’ *Chanakya Niti Shastra* 108
(This can be related indirectly with verse 720 of *The Kural*, ‘Indulging
in learned discourse before a gathering who are not your intellectual
peers, is like pouring nectar in to the gutters’.)

CONCLUSION

Both Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* and *Chanakya Niti* are classical works of Sanskrit authored by the same scholar, administrator and strategist known by the names of Kautilya, Vishnugupta or Chanakya. Both the texts are a rich repository of wisdom in their own domains. Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* is an encyclopaedic tome dealing with finer aspects of statecraft in its many dimensions. It is obviously meant for the top policy-makers. The slimmer *Chanakya Niti* has floating wisdom distilled over the ages with human experience on musings on day-to-day human life with its problems and solutions for all—from top leadership to the common citizen.

Thus, in the present enthusiasm to study and revisit ancient Indian Knowledge System, there is a need to reflect on the differences identified between the two texts. It demands a clearer, wider public dissemination

of the important distinction between Kautilya/Vishnugupta on statecraft and Chanakya on the prudent life.

To avoid confusion, it will be appropriate to refer to the text as Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and any attribution/quotation from the text to be of 'Kautilya' or 'Vishnugupta'. When referring to *Chanakya Niti*, it is self-evident that the author be identified as 'Chanakya'. By adhering to this simple rule in thought, speech and writing, the context, idea-content and philosophy of both the texts will be easily grasped and made relevant for scholarly reflection and research.

NOTES

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14. Ludwik Sternbach, 'Indian Wisdom and Its Spread beyond India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 101, No. 1, January–March 1981, pp. 97–131.
15. Ludwik Sternbach, *The Spreading of Chanakya's Aphorisms over 'Greater India'*, Oriental Book Agency, Calcutta, 1969. I thank late Dr Michael Liebig, the German Scholar of Kautilya, for providing the article and references.
16. A.N.D. Haksar, *Chanakya Niti: Verses on Life and Living*, n. 4.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.
18. Ludwik Sternbach, 'Indian Wisdom and Its Spread beyond India', n. 14, pp. 101–02.
19. A.N.D. Haksar, *Chanakya Niti: Verses on Life and Living*, n. 4.
20. *Ibid.*, p. xii. Title is A.R. Pancharukhi, ed., *Chanakya Samputa*, trans. Sarla Hulagi, Sanjaya Prakashan, Delhi, 2018.
21. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, HarperCollins, London, 2011, p. 10.