

The Indian Machiavelli: Pragmatism versus morality, and the reception of the Arthashastra in India, 1905–2014

MARIA MISRA

Keble College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Email: anna-maria.misra@history.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which the *Arthashastra* (*The Science of Wealth* or *The Science of Power*), an ancient text rediscovered in 1905, was interpreted by Indian politicians and commentators. It seeks to explain why the text's popularity changed so drastically over time, and why, despite the excitement about it in the first 20 years following its reappearance, it was largely ignored in the Gandhian and Nehruvian eras, until a striking revival of interest from the late 1980s onwards. It argues that these changes in the text's fortunes can be explained partly as a result of significant shifts in elite Indian political culture. It also suggests that we need to reassess our analysis of the fundamental fault-lines in Indian politics, questioning Chatterjee's and Nandy's argument on the centrality of tensions between Gandhian 'indigenous' thought and Nehruvian 'Western' modernity, and arguing for the importance of the conflict between a moral politics, endorsed by both Gandhi and Nehru, and a 'pragmatic' politics justified by the *Arthashastra*.

Introduction

In 1914, K. V. Ramaswamy Aiyangar, the leading doyen of ancient Indian history, hailed the recently rediscovered, supposedly third-century BCE text, the *Arthashastra* (*The Science of Wealth*):

The finding of the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya . . . has inaugurated a new epoch in the study of ancient Indian institutions, political and economic . . . [and it] assuredly prove[s] a corrective to the prevalent belief of our day in the total absorption of the ancient Indian intellect in metaphysical speculation. May we not also look on it, with some pride, as indicating the presence of

extensive schools of political thought and opinion in ancient India, in the days corresponding, and even anterior, to those of Plato and Aristotle . . .¹

A century later, the text is, if anything, even more popular, and appears on the syllabuses of several Indian business schools; in recent years its supposed author, Kautilya, or Chanakya, has become one of India's most invoked Indian statesmen, increasingly displacing Nehru, Gandhi, Akbar, and Asoka.²

But despite the centrality of this text in particular periods of Indian history, it has been surprisingly overlooked by historians of the nationalist movement and Indian political culture.³ And this is particularly unexpected given that for some years historians have been interested in the reception and use of ancient Indian texts in the nationalist movement. Instead they have largely focused on religious and legal texts, such as the *Upanishads*, the *Dharmasastras*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, all of which, in contrast with the *Arthashastra*, are either religious or philosophical texts—and if they do deal with statecraft, they do so within a religious and ethical frame.⁴

This article will explore the influence of this largely secular text on politics and statecraft, and the ways in which it was interpreted by Indian politicians and commentators since its rediscovery in 1905.

¹ Ramaswamy Aiyangar, K. V. (1935). *Considerations of Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Polity. Sir Subramanya Aiyar Lecture 1914*, 2nd edition, University of Madras, Madras, pp. 11–12, 51–52.

² Bhattacharya, R. (2012). 'B-Schools Offer India Inc. Leaders Crash Course in Kalidasa, Arthashastra and The Gita', *Economic Times*, Mumbai, 11 May; 'Babus of India' (2010). '10 Chanakya Quotes for Bureaucrats as Finance Minister Unveils Statue of Arthashastra Author in Gujarat I-T Office', 17 June: <http://www.babusofindia.com>, [accessed 12 February 2015].

³ There is, however, a large corpus of analytical studies of the text by Sanskritists and ancient historians. See for example: Kangle, R. P. (1965). *The Kautilya Arthashastra—Part III, a Study*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi; Vigasin, A. A. and Samozventsev, A. M. (1985). *Society, State and Law in Ancient India*, Stirling Publishers, New Delhi; Olivelle, P. (1987). 'King and Ascetic: State Control of Asceticism in the Arthashastra', *Festschrift Ludo Rocher, Adyar Library Bulletin*, 50, pp. 39–59; Bronkhorst, J. (2007). *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India*, Brill, Leiden; McClish, M. R. (2009). 'Political Brahmanism and the State: A Compositional History of the Arthashastra', PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin; Olivelle, P. and McClish, M. (2012). *The Arthashastra: Selections from the Classic Indian Work on Statecraft*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, pp. ix–lxxii.

⁴ Basu, S. (2002). *Religious Revivalism and Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and the New Hinduism in Nineteenth-century Bengal*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist Thought in a Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Zed Books, London; Dalmia, V. (1999). *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Benaras*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Kapila, S. and Devji, F. (2013). *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

In doing so, this article will seek to make a broader argument about the central themes that have driven Indian political debate in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Exploring the reception of classic or religious texts can cast a great deal of light on the nature of any political culture: debates over their meaning can reveal tensions within important political discourses, while examining their reception over time can point to significant changes in prevailing ideologies. Ancient texts provide an important frame of reference in many political cultures, but in modern India they have arguably been even more significant, as debates over which groups and values are superior have often been transposed into pre-colonial 'golden ages'.⁵ The history of the *Arthashastra's* reception, I shall argue, is particularly revealing about important tensions within Indian politics which have not been clearly identified by historians of modern India, and indeed compel us to reconceptualize the fundamental ideological divisions within Indian politics in the twentieth century.

In particular, this article will take issue with a view that is still dominant within the historiography, associated with historians such as Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, which sees **Indian political ideas as structured around a conflict between an Enlightened rationalism, associated with the 'West', and an 'authentic' national culture, rooted in a 'spiritual', 'moral' politics, that was neither 'derivative' nor dependent on Western models.**⁶ Chatterjee's analysis, in *The Nation and its Fragments*, has been particularly influential, dividing Indian thought into two spheres: an 'outer', in which Western Enlightenment models are dominant, and an 'inner', where more authentic, 'subaltern', and communitarian ideas have more purchase. For Chatterjee, therefore, Nehru, a proponent of Enlightenment modernity, was a genuine nationalist, unlike Gandhi whose standpoint lay 'entirely outside the thematic of post-Enlightenment thought, and hence of nationalist thought as well'.⁷ Nandy's distinction between Western-imitating

⁵ For this point, in the context of the novelist Bankim's use of Hindu 'golden ages' in order to avoid the use of either the British or the Muslim past to legitimize politics, see Kaviraj, S. (1995). *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 107–117.

⁶ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, pp. 1–36; Kaviraj, S. (1992). 'The Imaginary Institution of India' in P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey *Subaltern Studies VII*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Nandy, A. (1989). 'The Political Culture of the Indian State', *Daedalus*, 118:4, pp. 1–26.

⁷ Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, p. 100.

‘nationalism’ and an indigenous ‘patriotism’ is based on a similar dichotomy.⁸ Christopher Bayly’s recent subtle and nuanced book on Indian liberalism in some ways challenges this distinction by tracing the emergence of an indigenous liberal tradition in India, but he also reinforces it to some extent, arguing that Indian liberalism was more reliant on moral ideas of ‘compassion’ and ‘spiritual communion’ than more ‘abstract’ Western liberalisms.⁹

However, this approach, in setting an allegedly ‘Western’ Enlightenment politics against an ‘Indian’ ‘moral/subaltern’ one is a highly partial one. First, it ignores the fact that several Indian thinkers used the *Arthashastra* to argue that India had its own pragmatic, amoral politics. And secondly, while this distinction may cast light on divisions between Gandhian and Nehruvian nationalism between the 1920s and 1960s, it ignores the fact that they shared a moralism that contrasted with another more materialistic, pragmatic strain within Indian political thought—one that was more dominant before the 1930s and has become more influential since the 1980s.

An appreciation of this ideological tradition makes it much easier to understand the distinctiveness of the Gandhian-Nehruvian period, and its differences from the periods before and after. After a brief account of the text itself and of the tensions within it, this article will show that the *Arthashastra* was always controversial within India, but that it became important in Indian politics in two periods, between *circa* 1905 and *circa* 1930, and after *circa* 1985. In these eras, Indian elites were more cosmopolitan, more interested in addressing international elites (both political and commercial), and less concerned with integrating popular groups into politics. The amorality in the text—on both international relations and markets—was therefore more suited to the tenor of the times, as was the text’s advocacy of the secular values of warrior-kings (*ksatriyas*) and merchants, and its interest in social fluidity. Between the 1930s and 1970s, in contrast, both Gandhian and Nehruvian nationalists rejected the ‘pragmatic’ values of the *Arthashastra* in the name of a more ‘moral’ politics, which rejected the values of both *ksatriyas* and merchants, opening them up to the charge, from both left and right, that they were entrenching a Brahmin-dominated, hierarchical social order.

⁸ Nandy, A. (1994). *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

⁹ Bayly, C. A. (2012). *Recovering Liberties. Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 22.

An analysis of the reception of the *Arthashastra* therefore suggests that we need a new framework for understanding Indian politics throughout the twentieth century, one which departs from those developed by Chatterjee and others to explain the era of high nationalism in the middle of the century. The ways in which Indian politicians and commentators responded to the text show particularly clearly the tensions between those who stressed the primacy of morality (*dharma*) and those who stressed the importance of pragmatism and ‘power’ (*artha*), and highlight the major shifts in Indian political discourse, especially since the 1980s.

The Science of Wealth

As its title suggests, the *Arthashastra* was a text that broadly championed the values of political pragmatism, but it was also highly ambiguous—a quality that allowed even those who did not approve of its dominant message to cite and use it. There is general scholarly agreement today that it is a composite text, written between circa 300 BCE and circa 300 CE as an advice-book for kings. Its authorship is unknown, but it may be that Kautilya (‘the crooked one’) is a name for Chanakya, who was the chief minister of the first Mauryan emperor, Chandragupta (321–297 BCE), and that he was involved in aspects of its writing. However, the text seems to incorporate different world views, and recent scholarship suggests that it actually reflects two very different outlooks on the question of ethics, religion, and the place of Brahmins in political life—an earlier cosmopolitan-aristocratic one, and a later ‘Brahminical’ version, which was included in the text in the first century AD.¹⁰

The original text appears to have been a treatise on pure statecraft, with little attention being given to the place of religion—and what there is on it has an extremely cynical tone. It was compiled in India’s ‘classical’ era, in a relatively urbanized and trade-reliant empire centred in northeastern India (now Bihar). It was probably written by Brahmins who had abandoned their religious function and were employed as secular administrators by the warrior-prince rulers of northeast India sometime soon after circa 300 BCE.¹¹

These earlier passages from the *Arthashastra* provide an essentially ‘secular’ focus on the management of the state, both international

¹⁰ McClish, ‘Political Brahmanism’, pp. 49, 77, 89–90, 127, 155, 198–314.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 198–199, 239, 309–310. Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, pp. 4–9.

and domestic. The international sections are concerned with how to survive in a world of competing kingdoms. They suggest that the king engage in 'Machiavellian' diplomacy, carefully managing the 'Circle of Kings' (*Rajamandala*) surrounding his state, and sometimes allying with the neighbours of his enemies:

A king who is situated between two powerful kings . . . may begin to set one of them against the other by telling each that the other is a tyrant causing utter ruin to himself, and thus cause dissension between them . . . or, he may make friendship with traitors, enemies, and wild chiefs who are conspiring against both the kings. Or, pretending to be a close friend of one of them, he may strike the other at the latter's weak point by employing enemies, and wild tribes. Or, having made friendship with both, he may form a Circle of States.¹²

This advocacy of a foreign policy of *realpolitik* probably became the best-known aspect of the text, and even the *Arthashastra's* critics often accepted that it had useful advice on how to deal with a dangerous world. The text's ideas on the proper role of the state in the domestic sphere was, however, more controversial, as it assumed a high degree of state power and secrecy. For instance, the king was advised to establish a council:

All kinds of administrative measures are preceded by deliberations in a well-formed council. The subject matter of a council shall be entirely secret and deliberations in it shall be so carried that even birds cannot see them.

It also proposed that he establish a comprehensive system of spies:

Assisted by the council of his ministers tried under espionage, the king shall proceed to create spies: spies under the guise of a fraudulent disciple, a recluse, a householder, a merchant, an ascetic practising austerities, a class-mate or a colleague, a fire-brand, a poisoner, and a mendicant woman.¹³

The text, then, had few concerns about breaching conventional moral principles, and indeed it saw religion and ethics in an entirely utilitarian way. So kings are told to exploit the religious credulity of the populace: they are advised to be seen surrounded by people disguised as gods, so that people will assume the king has divine companions.¹⁴ They are also told to assume holy-man status by claiming to foresee

¹² *Arthashastra*, 7:3 in Shamasastri, R. (ed. and trans.) (1915). *Arthashastra of Kautilya*, University of Madras, Madras.

¹³ Shamasastri, *Arthashastra*, 1:8–18.

¹⁴ Doniger, W. (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Penguin Books, New York, p. 202; Shamasastri, *Arthashastra*, 13:1:3–8.

the deaths of certain people, and then have them killed, or arrange for statues of deities to fall on enemies.¹⁵

Not only is religion viewed cynically, but this older part of the text makes no mention of the central institution of Brahminical Hinduism: the *varnadharma*—the fourfold hierarchical division of society (Brahmin, Ksatriya (warrior), Vaisya (commoner), Sudra (worker)), and the argument that each has its own moral system (*dharma*). The text is not concerned with ethics or with fixed social hierarchies, and prescribes very little special treatment for Brahmins. As Mark McClish notes, ‘privileges afforded Brahmins are piecemeal’.¹⁶ Similarly, the classical Hindu *Trivarga*, or three aims of man, is also radically reordered. Whereas in the Brahminical *Dharmasastras* [science of morality], *dharma* (moral law or duty) always trumps *artha* (wealth and power) and *kama* (love or desire), in the older portions of the *Arthasastra*, *artha* subsumes the other two. In the first book Kautilya is said to have argued that, ‘*artha* alone is primary; for *dharma* and *kama* are based in *artha*’.¹⁷ The status of women also seems freer than in the *Dharmasastras*—divorce is permitted, as is remarriage for widows or abandoned wives. The text also, famously, suggests the state provide welfare for elderly prostitutes.¹⁸

However, a later version—the ‘*Adhyaya* redaction’, probably from around the turn of the millennium—adds a very different, distinctively ‘dharmic’ element to the text—that is, one that was both moralistic and justified the hierarchical division of society according to the *varna* system.¹⁹ The *varnadharma* is included, it is made clear that it is the duty of the king to uphold it, *dharma* takes precedence over *artha*, and Brahmins have special privileges within the state.²⁰ Some have seen this as a reflection of the changing state structure of the time, as the cosmopolitan imperial states gave way to regional, more agrarian states, where priestly Brahmins had more of a role in legitimizing royal rule.

McClish suggests that the *Adhyaya* redaction contains an essentially ‘religious ideology’ representing the outlook of much more agrarian-based ‘traditional’ and less cosmopolitan Brahmins, the effect of which

¹⁵ Shamasastri, *Arthasastra*, 1.11:17–18; 12:5: 1–5.

¹⁶ McClish, ‘Political Brahmanism’, p. 275.

¹⁷ Shamasastri, *Arthasastra*, 1. 7.6–7; McClish, ‘Political Brahmanism’, p. 243.

¹⁸ Shamasastri, *Arthasastra*, 3.3.16; 3.4.28, 3.13.1; Jaiswal, S. (2001). ‘Female Images in the Arthasastra of Kautilya’, *Social Scientist*, 29:3/4, p. 52.

¹⁹ McClish, ‘Political Brahmanism’, pp. 304, 311–312.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 269–296.

was to reframe an older, more secular statecraft 'within a greater religious order'.²¹ The Adhyaya additions ensured that the *Arthashastra* became more closely aligned to the *Dharmasastras*, including the *Laws of Manu* which became the main source for justifying the fourfold *varna* hierarchy. **And as a result, the text could be used to justify a more moralistic form of politics than its earlier authors had intended.** So, the version of the text that later generations read, while fundamentally 'Machiavellian', was ambiguous in its attitude towards morality and amorality in politics.

The text was similarly ambiguous on the issue of the state's role in the economy. In general, it called for a considerable degree of state power, explaining that:

[L]ands may be confiscated from those who do not cultivate them; and given to others ... If cultivators pay their taxes easily, they may be favourably supplied with grains, cattle, and money ... [The king] shall carry on mining operations and manufactures, exploit timber and elephant forests, offer facilities for cattle breeding and commerce, construct roads for traffic both by land and water, and set up market towns (*panyapattana*). He shall also construct reservoirs (*sétu*) filled with water either perennial or drawn from some other source. Or he may provide with sites, roads, timber, and other necessary things those who construct reservoirs of their own accord.²²

The state was also given a powerful welfare function:

The king shall provide the orphans, (*bála*), the aged, the infirm, the afflicted, and the helpless with maintenance. He shall also provide subsistence to helpless women when they are carrying and also to the children they give birth to.²³

This statism also at times involved a suspicion of merchants: for instance, the text advised that the king's spies should enter into partnerships with merchants to determine the real level of their profits. However, the text was by no means hostile to trade, as one would expect, given the reliance of the Mauryan kings on taxes from merchants. So it advised that:

There shall be no restriction to the time of sale of those commodities for which there is frequent demand; nor shall they be subject to the evils of centralization (*sankuladosha*) ... The superintendent shall show favour to those who import foreign merchandise: mariners (*návika*) and merchants who

²¹ Ibid, p. 305.

²² Shamastry, *Arthashastra*, 2:1.

²³ Ibid, 2:1.

import foreign merchandise shall be favoured with remission of the trade-taxes, so that they may derive some profit (*āyatikshamam parihāram dadyāt*) . . . Foreigners importing merchandise shall be exempted from being sued for debts unless they are (local) associations and partners.²⁴

More generally, the text assumed that the king was presiding over a relatively cosmopolitan and fluid society. It even suggested that he employ ascetics and people who had lost their profession as the state's spies—people of whom more conservative, Brahminical thinkers were very suspicious.

The Indian Aristotle rediscovered

Since the medieval period, the *Arthashastra* survived in various corrupted versions in *nitisastras* (science of politics) texts, but **the first version of the full text was only rediscovered in 1905 by R. Shamasastri, the archivist and librarian of the Mysore Oriental Research Institute** which had been recently founded. The work was **rapturously received in academic and political circles because it accorded with intellectual fashions within Indian nationalism of the time.**²⁵ Indeed, its arrival could not have been better timed.

The text appealed particularly to the more liberal, positivist elements within Indian nationalism, especially in Bengal, because it was regarded as **proof of a long tradition of Indian rationalistic political thought.** It was seen as a **challenge to Western 'orientalist' views that Indian culture was, in essence, mystical and spiritual.** In 1921 the nationalist historian, N. N. Law, argued that the text proved '[t]here were wide and various fields of political action in which the Hindu showed considerable judgement and acumen undelimited by the force of [religious] beliefs'.²⁶ For U. N. Ghoshal, professor of history and lecturer in comparative politics at Presidency College, University of Calcutta, it refuted the commonly held European notion that 'because of certain inherent deficiencies in their character Indians could not conceive the idea of a state or political science and that there is not provision for the interest of the state in the Hindu

²⁴ Ibid, 2:16.

²⁵ Sharma, R. (1959). *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, pp. 4–5.

²⁶ Law, N. N. (1921). *Aspects of Ancient Indian Polity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 218.

scheme'.²⁷ Meanwhile **B. K. Sarkar**, professor of political sciences at the nationalist National Council of Education in Bengal, insisted it had 'deliver[ed] a frontal attack on the traditional Western prejudices regarding Asia, such as are concentrated in Hegel, Cousin, Max Muller, Maine, Janet, Smith, Willoughby and Huntingdon'.²⁸ He also lamented the fact that the 'servile and degenerate Asia of today should be compared with an Asia which was the leader of humanity's progress [when] Hindu states were thoroughly secular'.²⁹

For Sarkar and others, the *Arthashastra* also offered a timely corrective to an anti-materialist turn in Indian nationalist thought—from Aurobindo Ghosh, who used the later Vedic *Upanishads*, to Mahatma Gandhi and his reinterpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*—which argued that Indian nationalism's strength lay in its spirituality and its rejection of Western material values. In his *Futurism of Young Asia* he launched a pugacious attack on such thinking:

From the standpoint [of] the student of Hindu heritage in polity he [an opponent of anti-materialism] should be asked to come forward with the message that India's Indianness is to be found only in Kautilya or that from the great vantage ground of the Arthasatra and of the Tamil inscription discovered at Uttaramallur . . . The absurdity of the current methodology in the appraisal of life's values is patent on the surface. Our Vishvakarma [architect for the Gods] had succeeded in inventing a bullock cart. He could not hit upon the steam engine. Is this why the bullock cart is to stand for 'spirituality' and the steam engine for gross materialism . . . Previous to the advent of the recent phase of civilisation East and West ran parallel, nay, identical in the 'point of view', in 'genius', in 'spirit'.³⁰

The *Arthashastra* appealed to many nationalists for other reasons too: **its arrival coincided with Japan's sensational defeat of Russia in the 1904–1905 war**, which was seen as an epiphanic moment marking the recovery of Asian self-respect and demonstrating that its culture could compete with the West's in the field of modern military technology

²⁷ Ghoshal, U. N. (1923). *A History of Hindu Political Theories: From the Earliest Times to the Ending of the First Quarter of the Seventeenth Century*, Humphrey Milford Press, London, pp. 5–9.

²⁸ Sarkar, B. K. (1922). *The Political Institutions and Theories of the Hindus: A Study in Comparative Politics*, Markart and Petters, Leipzig, p. viii.

²⁹ Sarkar, *Political Institutions*, pp. 9, 13.

³⁰ Sarkar, B. K. (1922). *The Futurism of Young Asia and other Essays on the Relations Between East and West*, Julius Springer, Berlin, pp. 119–120.

and strategy.³¹ The recovery of the *Arthashastra* seemed to show that this was no accidental victory—it had deep roots in ancient Asian culture. The rediscovery of this rationalistic text, which devoted a great deal of attention to pragmatic foreign policy and effective war-making, was therefore seen as yet another sign of the East’s renaissance. As Sarkar observed:

We have spoken of the genius of the Hindus for martial exploits, naval organisation, and colonizing adventure . . . In a political work of the fourth century B.C. the *Arthashastra*, eighteen departments of State are mentioned. The war office of the first Hindu emperor was a highly organized and efficient public body.³²

Many Indian nationalists of this era liked the practical, unsentimental, and non-religious focus of the text, and its stress on state-building and administration. This accorded well with the interests of those associated with the National Education Movement, like Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, who sought to turn away from constitutionalism, terrorism, and mysticism, and remake nationalism as a ‘self-strengthening’ movement, following the example of Japan. They preached a turn to practical ‘state-building’, with a focus on education, science, technology, and social science.³³ For Sarkar, Kautilya was the ‘Bismarck of the first Hindu empire’.³⁴

A particularly appealing aspect of the text was its apparent proof that the Mauryan empire was distinctively ‘modern’, and the bulk of historical writing between 1914 and 1927 was designed to show that the Mauryans had created a more advanced and rational state than its Western counterparts. Shamasastri, who first translated the rediscovered text, claimed that it showed that India, unlike Europe, had no doctrine of the divine right of kings.³⁵ Meanwhile Ghoshal suggested that, ‘the principles of tax surpass the achievements of classical antiquity and tend to approach the ideas of European thinkers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries’.³⁶ Similarly, N. C.

³¹ Van Bijlert, V. A. (2003). ‘The Icon of Japan in Nationalist Revolutionary Discourse’, in Narangoo, L. and Cribb, R. B. *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895–194*, Routledge, London, pp. 23–43.

³² Sarkar, *Futurism*, p. 282.

³³ Manjapra, K. (2012). ‘Knowledgeable Internationalism and the Swadeshi Movement, 1903–1921’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47:42, pp. 59–61.

³⁴ Sarkar, *Futurism*, p. 151.

³⁵ Shamasastri, R. B. (1920). *Evolution of Indian Polity*, Oriental Institute, Mysore.

³⁶ Ghoshal, U. N. (1929). *Contributions to the History of the Hindu Revenue System*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, pp. 14, 17.

Bandyopadhaya in his *Kautilya* of 1927 argued that India had even pre-empted Europe in the development of nationalism, claiming that: ‘Kautilya dreams the prospect of a truly “national” king’ who was to merge even his identity with the customs and language [of his country]’.³⁷

The text also gave Indian civilization a new standing internationally—no longer was it necessary to stress its supposed spirituality as its unique claim to international prestige. **Its focus on realpolitik also suited the amoral Social Darwinist ethos of the time.** As Sarkar exulted, ‘[i]n international politics Hindu theory since the days of Kautilya the Bismarck of the first Hindu empire has been candidly Machiavellian’.³⁸

Indian nationalists were therefore especially pleased at the attention the text received from international scholars. It was translated into several languages, and German scholars in particular hailed this Indian equivalent of Western classical ‘rationalism’. So the distinguished German Sanskritist, J. J. Meyer, advanced the view that the *Arthashastra* expounded the ‘true’ legal system of classical India, while the *Dharmashastra* literature was merely a form of religious obscurantism.³⁹

The *Arthashastra*’s eclipse: The Gandhian-Nehruvian era

As one would expect, however, one group of nationalists did not welcome the text—those who sought to meld nationalism with Hindu revivalism. In particular, they disliked the *Arthashastra*’s rejection of Hindu morality and Brahminical hierarchies, and denounced the very amorality and ‘Machiavellianism’ that its warmest supporters praised. So, for instance, B. G. Tilak, a prominent Maharastrian political leader who rooted his nationalism in a Brahminical Hindu ethos, used the term ‘Kautilyan’, meaning ‘without principle’, to denounce his Maharastrian rival, the positivist economist, M. G. Ranade.⁴⁰

³⁷ Bandyopadhaya, N. C. (1927). *Kautilya: Or An Exposition of his Social Ideal and Political Theory*, R. Cambay, Calcutta, p. 296.

³⁸ Sarkar, *Futurism*, p. 151.

³⁹ Meyer, J. J. (1927). *Über das Wesen altindischen Rechtsschriften und ihr Verhältnis zu einander und zu Kautilya*, Harrassowitz, Leipzig.

⁴⁰ B. G. Tilak, cited in Wolpert, S. (1962). *Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India*, University of California, Los Angeles, p. 78.

Neither was Gandhi an enthusiast for the text, even if he was a little less damning than Tilak. Although not an orthodox Hindu thinker, Gandhi still placed *varnadharma* at the very centre of his understanding of an independent India: while he condemned the old hierarchies of Brahminical Hinduism, he defended the fourfold *varna* system of inherited, functionally based occupations as the basis of a harmonious agrarian economy, and he was very dubious about trade, mobility, and urban living.⁴¹ His fundamentally ethical vision of politics also set him against the unprincipled pragmatism of the Kautilyan state. As he told Shamasastri, the by-now celebrated translator, in 1927, he was intrigued by the ideas in the *Arthashastra*, but declined to emulate the Mauryan chief minister's state-building, saying: 'To my way of thinking it is more important that the people are morally rectified first.'⁴² He was also clearly hostile to the power of the state implied in the text, demanding 'Who would bell the cat?'

Gandhi also condemned the text for its instrumental views of markets. He was not entirely hostile to markets, but had always had a 'moral economy' approach to the economy, and in 1941 he censured the *Arthashastra* for its supposed advocacy of amoral free-market practices and justification of exploitative wages:

This obsession with paying the lowest wage and taking the maximum work for it has been taken from the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. We must change this doctrine for a new one. We shall give the same wage to spinners and weavers ... And yet we want the burden on the buyer to be light. Thus we wish to create a socialist society. The socialism that [the] Indian can digest will be of this kind. It will be a socialism of the poor, but of the well-to-do poor.⁴³

In place of the *Arthashastra*, Gandhi valued very different ancient texts: the devotional text, the *Bhagavad Gita* (a Brahminical addition to the popular epic, the *Mahabharata*) and the more popular and rustic epic, the *Ramayana*. These texts not only suited the moral and 'dharmic' direction of his own thinking and that of the new Congress leadership he brought in during the 1920s to replace the old Bengali cadres and

⁴¹ Gandhi, M. K. 'A Vindication of Caste', in Ambedkar, B. R. (1968). *The Annihilation of Caste: with a Reply from M. K. Gandhi*, 3rd edition, Bheem Patrika Publications, Jullundur.

⁴² Gandhi, M. K. quoted in Srinivasaraju, S. (2009). 'Year of the Guru: It's a hundred years since the discovery of Chanakya's great work from a manuscript', *Outlook*, 27 July.

⁴³ Gandhi, M. K. (1941). 'Speech at All India Spinners' Association, 7th October', *Collected Works of M. K. Gandhi*, Vol. 74, Government of India, Delhi, p. 39. [Hereafter CWMKG.]

their more ‘Westernizing’ approach, they also appealed to the values of the peasant and pious merchant groups whom Gandhi so successfully incorporated into the nationalist movement.⁴⁴ In 1947 during India’s partition Gandhi explicitly contrasted the two approaches to politics. Gandhi had received several letters criticizing his refusal to abandon his non-violent stance and intervene to prevent the partition of India. This was well within his powers according to one correspondent who wrote, ‘[t]here is no doubt about your being a great man. Everyone calls you Mahatma. And you are a god because people worship you. Who would challenge you in politics?’ Gandhi’s response was interesting; he clearly felt this was an injunction to him to act like Chanakya and ‘save’ the unity of India. He replied, ‘[p]oor Chanakya’s spirit must be running from place to place in fear!’ He conceded that his interlocutors were justifiably angry but his response was to rebuke Chanakya for the ineffectiveness of pure realpolitik: ‘The second chapter of the *Gita* says: “Wrath breeds stupefaction, stupefaction leads to loss of memory, loss of memory ruins reason, loss of reason spells utter destruction,”’ he declared.⁴⁵

With the dominance (albeit contested) of Gandhi and his approach to politics in the nationalist movement of 1920s and 1930s, it is therefore no surprise that the *Arthashastra* rapidly lost its lustre, and with it the attention of political commentators. It was in this period that mention of the text in non-academic contexts became far less frequent—a collapse in popularity which lasted until the 1980s.

With the coming of independence in 1947 and the death of Gandhi the following year, one might have expected the *Arthashastra* to return to favour. In India, as elsewhere, powerful technocratic states, managed economies, and a belief in rationality and positivism were in fashion—precisely the politics Kautilya could legitimize. However, while Nehru approved of his state-building and modernity, there was a fundamental moralism to his politics. He was therefore unhappy about Kautilya’s ‘Machiavellianism’, his willingness to resort to any means to achieve laudable ends, and his preparedness to use war, for Nehru retained Gandhi’s commitment to non-violence and sought an international identity for India as an ethical power.

⁴⁴ Gould, W. (2004). *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 39, 48, 51–52.

⁴⁵ Gandhi, M. K (1947). ‘Speech at Prayer Meeting, 19th April’, *CWMKG*, Vol. 87, p. 312.

So while there was clearly an important division between Gandhi's anti-modernist nationalism and Nehru's technocratic one, as Chatterjee and others have pointed out,⁴⁶ this should not obscure their fundamental agreement on issues of morality in politics. Indeed, **from the perspective of Indian politics today, the similarities between the two seem more striking than their differences.**

Nehru read the *Arthashastra* in 1931, and showed his ambivalent attitude in a puzzling article published in the *Modern Review* in November 1937. Signed 'Chanakya', it purported to draw attention to certain worrying tendencies in Nehru's character, arguing that, although he was too aristocratic to have any truck with a vulgar ideology like fascism, he had the potential to become a dictator, especially given his lately discovered enthusiasm for economic planning.⁴⁷

Nehru's ambivalence can also be seen in the pages he devoted to the *Arthashastra* and the Chandragupta empire in *The Discovery of India* (1946). He declared that 'Chanakya has been called the Indian Machiavelli, and to some extent that comparison is justified.'⁴⁸ He described him as unscrupulous, and *ksatriya* (that is, warrior-like) in arrogance and force, but balanced by a supervening 'Brahmin-like' wisdom and sense of duty:

Bold and scheming, proud and revengeful . . . availing himself of every device to delude and defeat the enemy, he sat with the reins of empire in his hands and looked upon the emperor more as a loved pupil than as a master. Simple and austere in his life, uninterested in the pomp and the pageantry of high position, when he had redeemed his pledge and accomplished his purpose, he wanted to retire, Brahmin-like, to a life of contemplation.⁴⁹

More striking still in Nehru's idiosyncratic reading of Chanakya were the almost Gandhian-like characteristics the great 'Machiavelli' acquired:

Unscrupulous and rigid as Chanakya was in the pursuit of his aim, he never forgot that it was better to win over an intelligent and high-minded enemy than to crush him . . . and in the very moment of victory, so the story goes,

⁴⁶ See footnote 6.

⁴⁷ Nehru, J. N. (1937). 'Rashtrapati by "Chanakya"', *Modern Review*, November, reprinted in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. 8, Orient Longman, New Delhi, pp. 520–523. [Hereafter *SWJN*.]

⁴⁸ Nehru, J. N. (1999). *The Discovery of India*, 19th impression, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 123.

⁴⁹ Nehru, *Discovery*, p. 123.

he induced Chandragupta to be generous to his rival chief. So the story ends not in the bitterness of defeat and humiliation, but in reconciliation and in laying the firm and enduring foundations of the state, which had not only defeated but won over its enemy.⁵⁰

This desire to present the *Arthashastra* as a moralistic text accorded with the generally ethical view of politics presented in *The Discovery of India*. As Nehru wrote:

Some kind of ethical approach to life has a strong appeal for me, though it would be difficult for me to justify it logically. I have been attracted to Gandhiji's stress on right means and I think one of his greatest contributions to public life has been this emphasis.⁵¹

He therefore modified his earlier enthusiasm for Marxism, objecting to its one-sided materialist version that emphasized action over ethics:

It [the Marxist philosophical outlook] did not satisfy me completely, nor did it answer all the questions in my mind, and, almost unawares, a vague idealist approach would creep into my mind, something rather akin to the Vedanta approach. It was not a difference between mind and matter, but rather something that lay beyond the mind. Also, there was the background of ethics . . . I did not like the frequent divorce in communist, as in other, practice, between action and these basic urges or [moral] principles.⁵²

In 1950, now prime minister of an independent India, Nehru returned to the example of Chanakya in wars and diplomacy, and again, the Gandhian overtones are obvious:

On war I would advise you to read the ancient Sanskrit play, *Mudrarakshasa*, which deals with Chanakya . . . It is a political play dealing with the problem of peace and war. The great Indian who was the hero . . . was a master not only of statecraft but of war too. He waged war to establish a peaceful empire. He discusses this and says: 'It is always to be remembered that war is fought to gain a certain objective. War is not an objective. Victory is not an objective. War is fought to remove an obstacle . . .'⁵³

A similar moralistic tone is apparent in his praise of the text's attitude to welfare: 'In the happiness of his subjects his [the king's] happiness lies; in their welfare, whatever pleases himself he shall consider as not good, but whatever pleases his subjects, he shall

⁵⁰ Nehru, *Discovery*, p. 124.

⁵¹ Nehru, J. N. (1985). *The Discovery of India*, Centenary edition, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 28–29.

⁵² Nehru, *Discovery*, Centenary edition, pp. 29–30.

⁵³ Nehru, J. N. (1950). 'Destiny of Asia: Speech at 11th Conference on Indo-Pakistan Relations', 3 October, in *SWJN*, Vol. 15, pp. 506–507.

consider good.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, however, his ambivalence was more pronounced. He seems, for instance, to have seen echoes of the British imperial state in the *Arthashastra*'s 'widespread and rigid bureaucracy and there are frequent references to espionage'.⁵⁵

More suited to Nehru's technocratic but moralistic outlook was Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka (circa 304–232 BCE), who allegedly converted to Buddhism in reaction to his horror at the violence of war.⁵⁶ Asoka could be seen as just as much an economic modernizer as Chanakya, but with the added appeal of being an undeniably and self-consciously 'moral' ruler. Nehru devoted a great deal of space to him in his *Glimpses of World History*, describing how he banned the killing of animals, built wells and hospitals, educated women, and expanded India's four great universities so they attracted students from across Asia.⁵⁷

After independence Nehru was quick to replace the Gandhian iconography of the spinning wheel (which he regarded as backward-looking) on the Indian national flag with the Asokan wheel of Dhamma (law)—much to Gandhi's chagrin.⁵⁸ Similarly the famous lion capital on the Asokan pillar at Sarnath became the emblem of the new state and the Order of Asoka was introduced for military bravery. Nehru was at pains to proselytize his new symbols, as shown in his speech to the National Metallurgy Laboratory in Jamshedpur, to which the government had donated a replica Asoka pillar:

... that replica of the Asoka pillar we have put up, or that the people of Jamshedpur have put up here. It is a noble symbol of many things and perhaps you know that we as a country have adopted that top, the capital of that pillar, as our crest and symbol. ... That pillar, the original one was put up 2,200 years ago by one of the greatest sons of India, Ashoka. I might tell you that the wheel on the capital ... which is known as Ashoka Chakra was never used as a symbol of military might, but was a symbol of peace and righteousness. It was a symbol of scientific and industrial progress that we had in India. It serves as an inspiration to those who want to combine the past and the future in India.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Nehru, *Discovery*, p. 126.

⁵⁵ Nehru, *Discovery*, p. 125.

⁵⁶ Thapar, R. (1960). 'Asoka and Buddhism', *Past and Present*, 18, pp. 43–51.

⁵⁷ Nehru, *Discovery*, pp. 52, 132–135, 176.

⁵⁸ Jah, S. (2008). 'The Indian National Flag as a Daily Plebiscite', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43, pp. 43, 107.

⁵⁹ Nehru, J. N. (1950). 'Address at National Metallurgical Laboratory, Jamshedpur', 26 November, *SWJN*, Vol. 16, pp. 75.

In contrast to this domestic acclaim of all things Asokan, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* was effectively relegated to the field of foreign affairs and diplomacy. That this was a conscious decision is reflected in the naming of New Delhi's newly built diplomatic quarter, 'Chanakyaपुरी'.

The international prestige of the text also seems to have slipped somewhat in the post-war and Cold War era. The admiration and praise of German and British scholars in the 1920s was now replaced by the influential interpretation of Cold War intellectual, Karl Wittfogel. Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, published in 1957, condemned the text as typical of the proto-'totalitarianism' of Asian 'hydraulic states'. According to Wittfogel:

The *Arthashastra* (a political manual of ancient India) specifies the dangers which surround the ruler, and it discusses the many means by which they can be averted. His residence must be made safe ... All members of his entourage must be watched and controlled. The king must spy on his prime minister. He must beware of his close friends, of his wives, of his brothers, and most particularly of his heir apparent [for according to] Indian despotism, 'Princes, like crabs, have a notorious tendency of eating up their begetters.'⁶⁰

Even so the *Arthashastra* still had its defenders in the post-war era, not on the Nehruvian centre-left, but among more radical critics of Brahminical Hinduism. B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the so-called 'Untouchables', or Dalits, had launched a major attack on Hinduism, which he viewed as essentially an ideology of caste discrimination that had to be expunged from Indian political culture if India was to become a modern, integrated nation.⁶¹ He invoked the ancient text in the parliamentary debates over the Hindu Code Bill (1949–50), which had been introduced by Ambedkar in his capacity as India's law minister. The Bill proposed a moderate reform of Hindu personal law, which, under independent India's new constitution, would allow religiously rooted personal law codes to coexist with a secular civil code. The Bill sought, among other matters, to improve women's rights to property, to allow for divorce, and to curtail polygamy. In debate the Bill met with furious opposition and arguments that any kind of reform would amount to gross Westernization, together with the destruction of Hindu India's distinctive traditions, culture, and identity. As one speaker put it:

⁶⁰ Wittfogel, K. (1958) cited in Peterson, W. 'Oriental Despotism and Modern Totalitarianism', *The Antioch Review*, 18:1, pp. 94–95.

⁶¹ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*.

[the] group . . . who oppose this measure . . . is of the opinion that no change can be made in that [which] has been prescribed in the text of our *Vedas, Sastras* and *Smritis* . . . supporters of this Bill . . . [do] not at all like to see any of our old traditions, and [do] not want to recognise the fact that this country is one of the ancient countries having a brilliant past, glorious history, high culture and great traditions. Such type of reformers do not at all care as to what our past heritage is and how are we to reconstruct our country today. These reformers have been considerably influenced by Western education, and have scant regard for the ancient history, culture and even the old traditions in the sphere of social reforms.⁶²

Other speakers, however, more accurately saw **Ambedkar's position as evidence of hostility to a moral order or *dharma* associated with Brahmins and other 'higher' castes, rather than to ancient Indian culture as a whole.** H. Kamath noted that:

Those Members, within and without the House who are not wholly in favour of the Bill . . . take their stand—at least some of them—on the *Smritis*, the *Shastras* and our Dharma. Well, Sir, what is Dharma? Is it merely a code of ritual and externals and ceremonies or is it something deeper . . . ?⁶³

Meanwhile Seth Govind Das observed that:

The Honourable Dr. Ambedkar . . . pointed out that 10 per cent of the people amongst us who are called Caste Hindus Viz., *Brahmana, Ksatriyas*, or *Vaisyas* want to thrust something upon those who form the 90 per cent.⁶⁴

Ambedkar's own contribution to the debate was indeed founded on the notion that supposedly traditional Hindu marriage law was actually a Brahminical distortion of ancient laws established in the *Arthashastra*:

With regard to monogamy it may be that it is a new innovation . . . [an] illustration which I would like to give from the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. I do not know how many Members of the House have perused that book, I suppose many of them have. If they have, they will realise that the right to marry a second wife has been considerably limited by Kautilya.⁶⁵

Ambedkar's Bill was swiftly defeated, a defeat that prompted his withdrawal from political life, despite being hailed as the 'Solon' of India's new constitution. Ambedkar was not, however, to become a

⁶² Das, S. G. [translated from Hindi] (1949). 'Debate on the Hindu Code Bill', 25 February, *Proceedings of the Lok Sabha*, Government of India, New Delhi. [Hereafter *PLS.*]

⁶³ Kamath, H. V. (1949). 'Debate on the Hindu Code Bill', 25 February, *PLS.*

⁶⁴ Das, 'Debate on Hindu Code Bill', *PLS.*

⁶⁵ Ambedkar, B. R. (1949). 'Debate on the Hindu Code Bill', 25 February, *PLS.*

great champion of the *Arthashastra*. Ultimately his attitude to the text seems reminiscent of Nehru's—that it was simply too 'amoral' to have a central place in contemporary Indian political discourse. In 1950, soon after the defeat of his Hindu Code Bill, he wrote an influential article, 'Buddha and the Future of his Religion', in which he argued that any cohesive society needed either the sanction of a uniform law (which, with the failure of the Hindu Code Bill, was not to be the case in India), or the sanction of morality to hold it together.⁶⁶ His decision, in 1956, to convert to Buddhism and to encourage the mass conversion of Dalits, suggests that, like Nehru, he had discovered that the espousal of a purely 'pragmatic' politics was not a persuasive strategy in post-Gandhian India.

The *Arthashastra* continued to be relatively neglected in the public discourse of domestic politics throughout the 1960s and 1970s. It did, however, begin to reappear in the sphere of international politics and Indian diplomacy. The reason for this seems fairly clear: India's humiliating defeat in the Indo-China war of 1962. China had challenged the colonial-era borders in the Himalayas, demanding the reassignment of territory to China. Nehru had ignored China's increasingly threatening behaviour, insisting on the '*bhai-bhai*' (brotherly) relationship between the two nations. China then invaded the disputed territory (an area of Ladakh known as Aksai Chin), dealing a crushing blow to Nehru's idealistic Asokan-cum-Gandhian approach to international relations, and discrediting his vaguely Pan-Asian vision of non-alignment.

Partly in response to Nehru's failure, his successors, and especially his daughter, Indira Gandhi, adopted a far more pragmatic approach to foreign policy, more in accord with the *Arthashastra*'s 'circle of states' school of thought. Covert agreements with the United States permitted the Americans to monitor China's nuclear programme from Indian territory in the Himalayas; and India, despite its still public stance of 'Gandhianism', declined to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968. Somewhat ironically, in 1974, India's successful first nuclear explosion test was communicated from the military to Mrs Gandhi with the secret code words, 'The Buddha Smiles'.⁶⁷ Meanwhile Mrs Gandhi had enthusiastically embraced the

⁶⁶ Ambedkar, B. R. (2004). 'Buddha and the Future of his Religion', in Rodrigues, V., *The Essential Writings of B. K. Ambedkar*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

⁶⁷ Basrur, R. (2001). 'Nuclear Weapons and India's Strategic Culture', *Journal of Peace Research*, 38:2, pp. 181–198.

persona of a modern Chanakya after India's defeat of Pakistan in the eastern border war of December 1971.⁶⁸

In this period, too, changing scholarly fashions were beginning to shape a reading of the text which made its deployment in Indian domestic politics more acceptable. Between 1960 and 1965 the first fully authoritative edition of the text appeared since Shamasastri's *editio princeps* of 1915.⁶⁹ R. P. Kangle's three-volume work in Sanskrit and English made full use for the first time of several ancient and medieval commentaries, and of newly discovered versions of the text itself, including the Patan palm-leaf manuscript—the only North Indian version of the *Arthashastra*.⁷⁰

While Kangle insisted that the text had a single author, he conceded that it was odd that a political manual written in the Mauryan period should have made no mention of actual events. He also admitted that the state envisaged in the text bore little resemblance to what was known of the Mauryan state under Chandragupta from other texts and epigraphy.⁷¹ Such concessions left open the possibility that the text was far more recent than Kangle claimed. And in 1968 the German Sanskritist, Hartmut Scharfe, published *Untersuchungen zur Staatsrechtslehre des Kautilya*, which suggested, using a twelfth-century Malayalam commentary, that, while possibly based on an earlier verse text, the extant *Arthashastra* had been composed in the first century CE.⁷² Thomas Burrow went further, arguing that Chanakya and 'Kautilya' were definitely not the same person, that 'Kautilya' was a much later writer, and that the name was a deliberate pun on the word '*kutila*' meaning crooked or devious.⁷³ Meanwhile, the American scholar, Thomas Trautmann, using statistical linguistic

⁶⁸ Mansingh, S. (1984). *India's Search for Power: Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy, 1966–82*, Sage, New Delhi.

⁶⁹ Gonda, J. (1967). 'Review of The Kautilya Arthashastra by R. P. Kangle', *Oriens*, 20, p. 321.

⁷⁰ Kangle, R. P. (1960–65). *The Kautilya Arthashastra, Part I: A Critical Edition with Glossary; Part II: An English Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes; Part III: A Study*, University of Bombay, Bombay.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Scharfe, H. (1968). *Untersuchungen zur Staatsrechtslehre des Kautilya*, Harrasowitz, Wiesbaden.

⁷³ Burrow, T. (1968). 'Chanakya and Kautilya', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 48/49, p. 17.

analysis, concluded that it was a compilation of disparate pieces of prose written at different times with later verse additions.⁷⁴

All of these interpretations opened up the possibility that the *Arthashastra* was a later and 'corrupted' version of Chanakya's original, which, it could be plausibly surmised, had been far less 'Machiavellian' and more in accord with the religiously minded *Dharmasastras*. These new studies lent weight to those who had noted the overlap between certain portions of the *Arthashastra* and the *Dharmasastras*, particularly on the issue of *Rajdharma* ('the conduct of the king'). P. V. Kane's five-volume study of the *Dharmasastras* (originally published between 1930 and 1960) had argued that the *Arthashastra* had probably 'borrowed' its own *Rajdharma* segment from the *Dharmasastras*, which should therefore be regarded as older and more authoritative.⁷⁵

Such interpretations had a somewhat 'detoxifying' effect on the text. The *Arthashastra* could now be viewed less as a peculiar realpolitik exception to India's otherwise 'dharmic' political traditions, than as a somewhat tainted version of a purer source. This reading would render it more usable, even if it remained impossible to purge it entirely of its 'Machiavellian' connotations. Moreover, this hybrid 'dharmic'-cum-Machiavellian reading fitted the agenda of the now reviving Hindu right for it could now be employed not only to justify amorality in international competition, but also to valorize a Brahminical 'dharmic' and socially hierarchical politics at home.

The *Arthashastra* revived: Neoliberalism, realpolitik, and caste politics

However, despite this gradual change, it was not until the 1980s that the *Arthashastra* returned to the centre of political discourse, in large part as a consequence of two major global political shifts: the end of the Cold War and the global neoliberal turn, which particularly affected India during the Rajiv Gandhi era and afterwards. First, as scholars such as Dasgupta and Cohen have argued, geopolitical changes forced Indian elites to rethink the country's identity as a uniquely ethical non-aligned state, and encouraged a new realpolitik among elites in

⁷⁴ Trautmann, T. (1971). *Kautilya and the Arthashastra: A Statistical Investigation of the Authorship and Evolution of the Text*, Brill, Leiden.

⁷⁵ Kane, P. V. (1960–75). *History of Dharmasastra*, 5 vols, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona.

foreign affairs—most notably in their enthusiasm for making India a nuclear power.⁷⁶ Secondly, an increasingly fashionable neoliberalism led elites to favour market efficiency over moral considerations. As Varshney has argued, across the Indian political spectrum these groups sought to escape what they now saw as the stifling moral constraints of Nehruvianism and popular democracy in the name of ‘market rationality’.⁷⁷ The text’s valorization of a calculating, amoral, but efficient form of rule was therefore highly attractive, and its depiction of a more socially fluid and urban society seemed particularly relevant at a time when Indian elites were embracing a more open economy after decades of Nehruvian planning and autarky. To many, on both the Congress centre-left and Hindu nationalist right, the *Arthashastra* seemed to provide a bracing alternative vision to the post-Independence order, which, despite Nehru’s talk of modernity, was thought by many to have entrenched a static hierarchy of undeserving Brahminical bureaucrats. These issues were particularly salient at a time of intense conflict over caste, following the proposal in 1990 to introduce affirmative action for lower caste groups. More generally, the text’s no-nonsense, hard-nosed tone appealed to new generations of politicians who were reacting against what they saw as the hypocritical moralism in Indian politics established by Gandhi.

Even so, the text could be interpreted in very different ways, helped by the ambiguities within the composite text itself. Most important were differences between Indian politicians over the priority to be given to *artha* and *dharma*, and between its use in domestic and international politics. The text was most popular among those advancing a new secular, neo-liberal political and economic agenda, which was to be found in both of India’s major national political parties—on the right of Congress and among the neo-liberals in the Bharatiya Janata Party, an uneasy alliance of Hindu cultural nationalists, right-leaning economic liberals, and upper-caste groups disaffected by Congress’s supposed appeasement of lower castes and

⁷⁶ Dasgupta, S. and Cohen, S. (2010). *Arming Without Aiming: India’s Military Modernization*, Brookings Institute Press, Washington DC, pp. 101–104.

⁷⁷ Varshney, A. (1998). ‘Mass Politics or Elite Politics? India’s Economic Reform in Comparative Perspective’, *The Journal of Policy Reform*, 2:4, pp. 301–335; Kohli, A. (2012). *Poverty Amidst Plenty in the New India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 38–39, 46–47, 59.

Muslims.⁷⁸ The *Arthashastra* could be used as an indigenous source that lent legitimacy to a particular ‘technocratic’ model of neoliberalism, found in several countries—one that relied on an activist state to promote marketizing reforms.⁷⁹

However, it was also deployed on occasion by the Hindu nationalist right, who candidly admired its Machiavellian approach to foreign policy. The Hindu right found it more difficult to apply in a domestic context owing to its ambiguity on issues of caste and social hierarchy, but, as we shall see, with certain distortions (to some extent ‘authorized’ by the scholarly interpretations of the 1960s and 1970s), it was used to justify Bharatiya Janata Party-style, pro-upper caste politics at home too.

One of the first major figures regularly to invoke Kautilya in domestic politics was the veteran congressman (and since July 2012, president of India), Pranab Mukherjee. Mukherjee, a Bengali, began his career teaching political science in Bengal before entering national politics as a protégé of Indira Gandhi in 1969. He became Indian finance minister for the first time in 1982–1984 and again in 2009–2012. He has also been India’s commerce minister, foreign minister, defence minister, and head of the Planning Commission. He was closely associated with the liberalization of the Indian economy under the 1991–1996 Congress government and has been associated with campaigns for fiscal responsibility—presiding over India’s repayment of the final tranche of its International Monetary Fund loan in 1984, and its deficit reduction and tax reform between 2009 and 2012. Mukherjee’s penchant for quoting the text began as early as his 1984 budget speech, as the *Indian Express* noted:

Way back in his Budget speech for 1984–85, Mukherjee had quoted a Sanskrit couplet of Kautilya, while talking about his ‘endeavour to keep the budgetary deficit to a relatively low figure’.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Corbridge, S. (2013). ‘The Political Economy of Development in India since Independence’, in Brass, P. *The Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 310–314.

⁷⁹ Fourcade-Gourinchas, M. and Babb, S. (2002). ‘The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neoliberalism in Four Countries’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 108:3, pp. 533–579. Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb distinguish between a more radically laissez-faire model of neoliberalism (as seen in Britain and Chile), and a ‘latecomer’ model of neoliberalism in which the activist, technocratic state has a stronger role (as adopted by France and Mexico). India fits the second model.

⁸⁰ Mukherjee, P. (2012). Quoted in the *Indian Express*, 16 March.

It was difficult to present Kautilya as a full-blooded advocate of neoliberal marketizing policies, given his harsh comments about businessmen and advocacy of heavy state involvement in the economy. However, the text could legitimately be seen as a handbook of good government, free of corruption, with effective taxation and low deficits—all of which coincided with the emerging neoliberal critique of big, pork-barrel government during the Rajiv Gandhi era. And although the text did call for welfare, its hard-nosed, amoral, technocratic approach appealed to the unsentimental, post-Nehruvian generation under Rajiv Gandhi. Twenty-five years after his first foray into Kautilyan rhetoric, Mukherjee became bolder in his use of the great ‘Machiavellian’. In July 2009, again introducing his budget bill, he declared:

In the interest of the prosperity of the country, a King shall be diligent in foreseeing the possibility of calamities, try to avert them before they arise, overcome those which happen, remove all obstructions to economic activity and prevent loss of revenue to the state.⁸¹

A year later he announced that his forthcoming tax reforms had been ‘guided by the principles of sound tax administration as embodied in the words of Kautilya’.⁸² At about this time Mukherjee unveiled a statue of Chanakya outside the newly built income tax office in Ahmedabad; and to mark Mukherjee’s long association with the Mauryan statesman, the informal website of the elite Indian Administrative Service—*babusofindia.com*—suggested various quotable maxims taken from the *Arthashastra* intended to satirize Mukherjee by drawing attention to the text’s extreme cynicism and, in parts, absurdity:

‘A person should not be too honest. Just as straight trees are chopped-down first, honest people are taken advantage of first’, ‘Even if a snake is not poisonous, it should pretend to be venomous’, and ‘Prostitutes don’t live in company of poor men, birds don’t build nests on a tree that doesn’t bear fruits and citizens never support a weak administration.’⁸³

Undeterred by this ridicule, on becoming president of India, Mukherjee declared to journalists that the *Arthashastra* remained his favourite book and that a portrait of the Mauryan statesman would be

⁸¹ Mukherjee, *Indian Express*.

⁸² Mukherjee, *Indian Express*.

⁸³ Babus of India, ‘10 Chanakya Quotes for Bureaucrats’.

prominently displayed in his rooms in *Rashtrapati Bhavan* (the president of India's official residence).⁸⁴

Another influential figure of the secular centre to embrace Kautilya was **Jairam Ramesh**. Ramesh, an American-trained economist and engineer and one-time minister for Rural Affairs, began his career as a journalist and political commentator. Despite being a Congressman between 1998 and 2002 he became a regular contributor to the right-liberal and Bharatiya Janata Party-leaning *India Today* weekly magazine. His widely read column was written under the under the nom de plume of 'Kautilya', and as such, Ramesh adopted an unreservedly neoliberal position on issues of economic reform. This was embellished by a stance of humorous 'realism' towards various shibboleths (as he saw it) of the Indian left establishment. So, for example, on launching the book of his collected articles, *Kautilya on Globalisation*, in Kolkata—a city famous for its intellectuals and communist politics—he told his audience that 'thirty years ago Kolkata was far ahead of Shanghai', but now 'was a dump' by comparison. This decline he attributed to a fondness for 'learning' rather than 'earning', restrictive labour laws, excessive concern to protect small 'cottage' industries, and a refusal embrace 'globalization'. Kolkata, he declared, 'must move beyond ideology'.⁸⁵

In his last column as 'Kautilya', Ramesh reflected on the persona he had so enthusiastically projected. To charges that his columns were 'too clinical, too cold-bloodedly analytical' he retorted, '*Mea culpa!*'⁸⁶ **Like many neoliberals of the time he was anxious to dissociate himself from either 'Gandhian' moralism or excessive socialist 'idealism'**. In the same valedictory he claimed he had chosen the pseudonym because he believed there must be room in Indian public life for an intellectual who evaluated issues pragmatically 'based on the merits of the case'.⁸⁷ This anti-idealistic outlook could be found across parties, and Ramesh's book launch in Delhi was hosted by the then Bharatiya Janata Party minister for disinvestment and infamously 'Hindu nationalist right' journalist, Arun Shourie. In his speech Shourie told his audience that he warmly endorsed the message of

⁸⁴ Chowdhury, N. (2012). 'Redefining the Presidency', *Times of India*, 25 July.

⁸⁵ Ramesh, J. (2002). Quoted in the *Times of India*, 4 October.

⁸⁶ Ramesh, J. (2002). 'Time to Sign Off', *India Today*, 13 May.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

the book which was that India should ‘stop wasting time with brilliant ideas that have no basis in reality in order to push ahead quickly’.⁸⁸

This kind of ‘pragmatic’ pro-market interpretation of the *Arthashastra* was considerably boosted by an influential academic article that appeared in the *Indian Economic Review* of 1996: ‘Kautilya’s Arthashastra: A Neglected Precursor to Classical Economics’, which argued that **aspects of the text were clear precursors of central tenets of neo-classical economic thought:**

Writing more than 2,000 years before Hume, Smith, Ricardo and J. S. Mill, Kautilya anticipated their thoughts on the importance of conducting trade in accordance with the principles of comparative advantage, that imports are as important as exports in promoting the nation’s economic development and growth, and that reciprocal demand will determine the value of commodities in bilateral and multilateral trade ... One can only conjecture that trade theory, principles of taxation, and the labour theory of value ... might have evolved much earlier ... if Kautilya’s views had been known to scholars such as St. Thomas Aquinas in the late middle ages.⁸⁹

However, the centre and the centre-right were not allowed to appropriate Kautilya without challenge: the left soon mounted its own claim to the newly relevant text. Some on the left sought to place it in the context of contemporary ethics rather than contemporary market economics. For instance, in the same year that the *Indian Economic Review* article appeared, the state-backed Samitya Akademi hosted a major conference of Sanskritists and other historians to examine the contemporary lessons of the text, and their views were summed up in the title of the published volume: ***Kautilya’s Arthashastra and Social Welfare.*** The volume’s editor, K. N. Jha, insisted in his preface that, ‘The entire philosophy of Kautilya aims at doing [sic] welfare to human beings living in popular society.’⁹⁰

However, others on the centre-left sought to use the text in a less moralistic way. **Amartya Sen, in particular, employed the *Arthashastra* to justify a market system, but one which involved more welfare and greater reliance on state action.** He had already laid the ground for this kind of approach in a nuanced reading of the *Arthashastra*’s attitude to usury. In a 1993 article he examined a range of ancient texts,

⁸⁸ Shouri, A. (2002). Quoted in the *Times of India*, 12 September.

⁸⁹ Waldauer, C., Zahka, W. and Pal, S. (1996). ‘Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*: A Neglected Precursor to Classical Economics’, *Indian Economic Review*, 31:1, p. 107.

⁹⁰ Jha, K. N. (1996). *Kautilya’s Arthashastra and Social Welfare*, Samitya Akademi, New Delhi.

including Aristotle and Deuteronomy, for their stance on ‘usury’.⁹¹ He noted, approvingly, that Kautilya was alone among the ancients in not condemning money-lending outright, in recognizing that credit could contribute to social welfare, and in adopting a nuanced approach to interest charges: ‘Maximum rates were to be varied according to various criteria related to the use of the loans and their respective burdens.’⁹² But, crucially for Sen, Kautilya also made a pragmatic, non-moralizing case for the regulation of financial markets by the state:

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* also indicates that it is not necessary to regard interest-charging to be intrinsically evil (or finance to be a generally inferior form of activity) in order to arrive at the recommendation that it be extensively regulated through laws geared to normative objectives. The issue of consequential badness has to be distinguished from intrinsic wickedness.⁹³

This kind of reading of the text continues to be authorized by scholars, and has been boosted recently by the 2012 publication of **Thomas Trautmann’s study, *Arthashastra: The Science of Wealth***.⁹⁴ Trautmann is a highly respected academic Sanskritist and his study presents the latest academic view of the text, written in a popular form aimed at a general educated readership. The book has garnered a great deal of press attention, much of it focused on the ‘corrective’ it presents to what are now regarded as simplistic quotation of Kautilya by Indian politicians. The Indian weekly *Business Standard* published a lengthy review:

More than historians or Sanskrit scholars, finance ministers of independent India can take some credit for making Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* popular among ordinary Indians ... Finance ministers in India would do well to read [Trautmann] to improve their understanding of *Arthashastra*. That may also prevent them from selectively quoting Kautilya in their Budget speeches, since all that King Chandragupta’s prime minister wrote, after all, is not relevant in today’s India.

Among things ‘not relevant’ the review notes the text’s far from neo-liberal attitude to businessmen:

⁹¹ Sen, A. (1993). ‘Money and Value: On the Ethics and Economics of Finance’, *Economics and Philosophy*, 9:2, pp. 203–227.

⁹² Sen, ‘Money and Value’, p. 209.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Trautmann, T. (2012). *Arthashastra: The Science of Wealth*, Allen Lane, New Delhi.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* appears to have been rather harsh in according a none-too-respectable status to traders and merchants . . . The overall sense is that the king needs to watch the traders suspiciously as they are prone to cheating customers and making profits through 'anti-social' methods. *Arthashastra* also has stories of rich merchants being made to pay an inordinately high price for acquiring a piece of land. All this suggests a tense relationship between the king and the merchant—a legacy perhaps even today's rulers suffer from.⁹⁵

Trautmann's study therefore supports the centre-left reading of the *Arthashastra*: the view that markets are necessary and to be welcomed, but that the state has a large role to play in promoting welfare through market regulation. It also supports the centre-left view that not all bureaucrats are corrupt 'babus' (a derisive term for government clerks). Indeed, the Trautmann reading places the *Arthashastra* firmly in the tradition of seeing private business as just as great a threat to ethical practice as state officials. There is some evidence that this interpretation has already penetrated conceptions of business leadership and contributed to a flurry of courses in the *Arthashastra* and 'value-based management' at India's leading business school.⁹⁶

The other striking reappropriation of the *Arthashastra* in this period was to be found in the Hindu right's efforts to impose a Brahminical 'dharmic' meaning on it. In 1991–1992 the Indian state television corporation, Doordashan, screened a 47-part TV series, *Chanakya*, which purported to be a historical recreation of the events surrounding the invasion of India by Alexander the Great and the subsequent formation of the Mauryan empire of the fourth century BCE. The series was divided into three parts: in the first, the young Brahmin, Chanakya, witnesses his father's murder by the corrupt king of Magadha; the second deals with the invasion of North India by Alexander, and the successful expulsion of the Greeks by Chandragupta; the third tells the story of the removal of the king of Magadha and the establishment of the glorious Mauryan empire. The film had a highly nationalistic agenda, and its main message was that Chanakya's extreme cynicism and amorality were entirely compatible with an overarching moral good—nationalism:

In a far-reaching reinterpretation of *dharma*, the patriotic worshipper of the nation [Chanakya] could lie, cheat, bribe and incite in the cause of *dharma*

⁹⁵ Bhattacharya, A. (2012). 'Review of T. Trautmann, *Arthashastra: The Science of Wealth*', *Business Standard*, 19 May.

⁹⁶ Bhattacharya, 'B-Schools Offer India Inc. Leaders Crash Course in Kalidasa, *Arthashastra* and The Gita'.

where *dharma* now stood for securing the integrity and Brahmanic values of the nation.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, having saved the nation and built an empire, Chanakya shows his ultimate loyalty to Brahminical values by withdrawing from public life to become a *shikshak*, or intellectual mentor.

The series was shown at a time when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was achieving unprecedented popularity in its campaigns against the incumbent Congress rulers, whom it labelled corrupt, socialist, and appeasing of India's 'enemies', both internal and external. Its unprecedented success was based on the mobilization of upper castes, and especially Brahmins, against religious minorities and also against plans to introduce affirmative action in higher education and public sector employment for 'Other Backward Castes' (a policy which was partially implemented in 1993).⁹⁸ It was this nationalistic, pro-upper caste, and pro-market agenda that the *Chanakya* series sought to further, in its elevation of Brahmins; its denigration of foreigners, minorities, and Buddhists; and in its efforts to show that the moneyed merchants, if properly treated and not 'exploited' by the king, could be part of India's national project.

Chandraprakash Dwivedi, the writer, director, and lead actor in the series, did not hide his political sympathies. He explained, 'I am not making a historical film, but interpreting the life of the first man with a national consciousness.'⁹⁹ Dwivedi was proudly photographed with various Bharatiya Janata Party leaders who visited the set. The series was explicitly designed to appeal to the urban middle-class Indians who were behind the Bharatiya Janata Party's success. In contrast to the recently broadcast multi-episode TV serials, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which were seen by India's middle classes as populist and lowbrow, Dwivedi made efforts to cast classical actors, use historically accurate sets and costumes, and ensure high production values.¹⁰⁰

But generally this 'dharmic' interpretation did not win out over its rivals. The view of the text, promoted by both centre-left and

⁹⁷ Chakravarty, U. (2009). 'Inventing Saffron History: A Celibate Hero Rescues an Emasculated Nation', in Nair, J. and John, M., *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economics of Modern India*, Zed Books, London, p. 247.

⁹⁸ Hasan, Z. (2001). 'Transfer of Power? Politics of Mass Mobilisation in UP', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36:46/47, p. 4404. 'Other Backward Castes' refers to lower caste groups, apart from Dalits and 'Scheduled Tribes' who already benefited from affirmative action under the terms of the Indian constitution.

⁹⁹ Chakravarty, 'Inventing Saffron History'.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

centre-right, justifying the central role of a reformed, uncorrupted state as a partner with the private sector in pursuit of globalization and neoliberalism, had become very popular by the 2000s. Indeed, citations from the *Arthashastra* become something of a cliché in business and economics journals where articles such as: ‘Cartels in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*’, and ‘From Kautilya to Benfold—Trends in Forensic and Investigative Accounting’ proliferated.¹⁰¹ **Kautilya seemed set to become India’s answer to China’s *Sun Tzu* in the popular ‘ancient-sage-as-business-guru’ market.**

The *Arthashastra*: A primer of Modian nationalism?

However, towards the end of the 2000s, there were signs of a new political prominence for the *Arthashastra*, partly as a result of a shift in the politics of the right. Under **Narendra Modi**, a major Bharatiya Janata Party figure since 2009 and the party leader since 2013, the Party began to respond to the rise of Other Backward Caste political parties, by diluting its pro-high caste stance and appealing to lower castes.¹⁰² **Modi then combined this more inclusive view of caste with a platform that included advocacy of an activist, technocratic, and ‘clean’ state; sympathy for big, globally oriented business; and an assertive, non-moralistic foreign policy. Clearly, the *Arthashastra* could be seen as a precursor of this new ‘Modian’ nationalism and, indeed, Modi and his advisers have made several references to the text.**

An early manifestation of the ‘Modian’ *Arthashastra* can be seen in the best-selling 2010 novel, *Chanakya’s Chant*, by **Ashwin Sanghi**, a Yale-educated businessman from an affluent corporate family. The book is not politically partisan, but uses the story of Chanakya/Kautilya, Chandragupta, and the *Arthashastra* to illustrate many of the themes which became central to Modi’s successful campaign in the parliamentary elections of 2014. *Chanakya’s Chant* tells the story of

¹⁰¹ Kumar, V. (2012). ‘Cartels in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*’, *Czech Economic Review*, 6, pp. 59–79; Bhattacharya, S. (2002). ‘From Kautilya to Benfold—Trends in Forensic and Investigative Accounting’, *ePublications@Bond*, School of Business, Bond University, 3.1.

¹⁰² For the Bharatiya Janata Party’s dilution of pro-high caste, anti-reservation (affirmative action) rhetoric, see Chandra, K. (2005). ‘Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 3:2, pp. 235–252. For the rise of Other Backward Caste politics since the 1990s, see Jaffrelot, C. and Kumar, S. (2012), *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Politics*, London, Routledge.

a modern reincarnation of Chanakya in small-town Uttar Pradesh, his alliance with a local businessman to establish a new political party, and his grooming of a new Chandragupta to create a united, prosperous, and internationally respected India. The novel focuses on a set of themes central to the politics of the anti-Congress right of the period. First, the Chanakya figure, Gangasagar, is exultantly amoral, and sees Indian unity, economic efficiency and, international power as ends in themselves, requiring no justification; Chandini Gupta, the Chandragupta figure, does have moralistic attitudes, but the novel suggests that she can only have a positive effect if she allows herself to be manipulated by her pragmatic mentor. Secondly, the poor Brahmin, Gangasagar, ensures that the new Chandragupta can appeal to a cross-caste and cross-community constituency: she is a slum-dweller of indeterminate caste background who is then given an education in Oxford; she is also adopted by a Muslim slumlord-turned-politician. And thirdly, rather against the spirit of the original text, business is given an explicit role in government, as Gangasagar persuades the businessman, Agrawal, to finance his project to bring Chandini to power. As he explains,

In India's untidy democracy, politics and business shall always need each other. The former is about power but needs wealth to realise it; the latter is about wealth but needs power to sustain it. Let me become your political strength.¹⁰³

In some ways, Sanghi's novel was prescient, as Narendra Modi, from an Other Backward Caste business caste, achieved an impressive victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014—although he had combined the roles of Gangasagar/Chanakya and Chandini/Chandragupta. Modi has emphasized his Other Backward Caste identity, and despite his poetry-writing, has moved away from the scholarly upper-caste ideal of the political leader—common on the nationalist right, and embodied in the figure of the previous Bharatiya Janata Party prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He has thus been able to appeal to a new, aspirational Other Backward Caste identity, which values hard work and pragmatism against Congress's alleged elitist intellectualism and ineffectiveness.¹⁰⁴ It is therefore no surprise that he won a large number of Other Backward Caste and even Dalit

¹⁰³ Sanghi, A. (2010). *Chanakya's Chant*, Westland, New Delhi.

¹⁰⁴ On new Other Backward Caste political identities, see Ilaiah, K. (2014), 'Kautilya versus the King', *Asian Age*, 10 October.

votes in northern India in 2014.¹⁰⁵ However, Modi has also skilfully integrated this Other Backward Caste politics with that of mainstream high-caste nationalism, through his championing of Sardar Patel, Gandhi's deputy. Patel, a major figure in Modi's Gujarat, was the most unabashed Hindu cultural nationalist in Congress's front-line leadership, and was championed by some as a more effective and less idealistic alternative to Nehru.¹⁰⁶ And in launching a new 'Sardar Patel National Unity Day' on 31 October 2014, Modi explicitly likened Patel to Chanakya:

Centuries ago Chanakya conducted a successful experiment of establishing a strong set up by uniting small princely states . . . the same great work has been done by the man whose birth anniversary we are celebrating today.¹⁰⁷

Predictably, Modi has also used the *Arthashastra* to promote a number of messages shared with Congress neoliberals like Pranab Mukherjee—such as the need for a clean, uncorrupted state that helps rather than hinders business. However, the tone of his statements echo *Chanakya's Chant* in favouring business more than his Congress rivals do. With his slogan 'Minimum government, maximum governance', Modi has promised to promote the interests of big business. However, for Modi, cutting red tape does not involve reducing state power. Indeed, **the Bharatiya Janata Party has used it to justify an IT-savvy state, using social media as way of managing public opinion—a modern equivalent to Kautilya's network of spies.** As Radhakrishnan Pillai, director of Mumbai's Chanakya Institute of Public Leadership and an adviser to the ' . . . IT cell' explained, Modi's successful 2014 social media campaign owed a great deal to the principles of the *Arthashastra*:

For any king, information gathering and foreign policy are key. In the *Arthashastra*, a king is supposed to use his spies in the night so that by the early morning he has all the information required to prepare his strategy.

¹⁰⁵ Narayan, B. (2014). 'The Secret of BJP Success in Uttar Pradesh: Winning over Dalits and OBCs, and a dose of Hindutva', 23 May: www.dnaindia.com/authors/badri-narayan, [accessed 12 February 2015].

¹⁰⁶ On Gujarati political identities and the reaction against Gandhianism in the 1990s and 2000s, see Suhrud, T. (2008). 'Modi and Gujarati "Asmita"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43:1, pp. 11–13.

¹⁰⁷ (2014). 'PM says Mahatma Gandhi was Incomplete without Sardar Patel, Also Rakes up 1984 anti-Sikh Violence', *Times of India*, 31 October.

Hence every morning before 6am the ‘IT cell’ was ‘already on the job . . . finding out what was trending on social networks like Twitter and Facebook’.¹⁰⁸

However, the area where Arthasastran ideas have been most evident since Modi came to power have been in **his emphasis on foreign affairs**. Contrary to expectations, and in contrast with his predecessors, Modi has devoted much more energy in the first months of his premiership to foreign policy than domestic reform, and in Arthasastran fashion, he has pursued a pragmatic approach, far from the old Nehruvian idealism. He has focused on promoting India’s economic and strategic interests in visits to the great powers, and one might almost see his first initiative—inviting his near neighbours from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation—as an attempt to implement Kautilya’s ‘circle of kings’ strategies.

Conclusion

The notion that Indian politics is marked by a fundamental tension between Western modernity and indigenous tradition has understandably become a powerful one. The dramatic confrontation between Gandhian and Nehruvian visions of nationalism can easily be mapped onto post-1970s debates over modernity and post-modernity, with critics of Western projects of ‘modernization’ finding support in Gandhi’s own critiques of Nehruvian socialism. However, an examination of the reception of the *Arthashastra* over a period of more than a century helps us to escape the interpretive frameworks established during the period of high nationalism, and to develop an approach that makes sense of Indian politics throughout the twentieth century.

The contrast between ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘indigenous’ thought might have made sense of the years between the 1930s and 1960s, when tensions between Gandhian and Nehruvian nationalisms were at the forefront of politics. However, as the changing reception of the *Arthashastra* suggests, we need to grasp another dichotomy to understand the eras before 1930 and especially after the 1970s—between a moralism that could sometimes have Brahminical, hierarchical, and

¹⁰⁸ Kumar, K. (2014), ‘The Untold Stories of Narendra Modi’s Social Media Plan in Lok Sabha Polls’, *The Economic Times*, 5 August.

‘dharmic’ overtones, and a pragmatism that tended to promote the dilution of caste hierarchies.

Both Gandhi and Nehru favoured a moralistic politics, which dominated the era between the 1930s to the 1960s. But both before and after this era, the *Arthashastra* was used to defend a much more pragmatic politics—whether favouring the Social Darwinist realpolitik of the early part of the century, or the pro-market, neo-liberal pragmatism of the latter part. And while the *Arthashastra* has been subject to a great deal of contestation, generally its popularity waxed and waned along with the respectability of an anti-moralistic approach to Indian politics.

Of course, the *Arthashastra* is only one text. However, an analysis of political commentaries on and interpretations of this, and other ancient texts, can tell us a great deal about the main fault-lines within Indian politics. If we are to enter the discursive world of Indian politics successfully, we need a much more comprehensive understanding of the changing reception of India’s classical legacy.