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The concept of dharma in Kautilya's Arthashastra and its relevance today

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Abstract

The concept of Dharma was essential to Kautilya's Arthashastra, his work on governance and administration. Dharma, the universal moral and ethical order, is a vital component of the social and political order, according to Kautilya. The Arthashastra emphasises the state's obligation to safeguard dharma, which it defines as the virtuous behaviour expected of individuals in various social positions. This paper looks at Kautilya's Arthashastra and how the idea of dharma fits into modern life. The Arthashastra is an ancient Indian book about how to run a country, and one of its main ideas is dharma, which is seen as essential for keeping a fair and peaceful society. The paper says that the principles of dharma, such as fairness, justice, and compassion, provide a framework for ethical governance and are still important today. Through an analysis of the Arthashastra, case studies, and criticisms, the paper looks at how dharma can help policymakers make decisions that are good for society as a whole and help build a more fair and peaceful society. In the end, the paper shows that the idea of dharma in Kautilya's Arthashastra is still important and can teach modern policymakers a lot about how to govern in an ethical and fair way.

Keyword: Dharma, Kautilya, Arthashastra, ethical governance, utilitarianism, violence, cultural distinctions, societal differences, controversy, criticism and political issues

Introduction

Kautilya's Arthashastra is an old Indian text that is a guide to politics, economics, and military strategy. During the Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE), an important advisor to Emperor Chandragupta Maurya named Chanakya, who was also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, wrote it. The Arthashastra shows how politics and society worked in ancient India, as well as how complex the country's political and economic systems were. The word "dharma," which means "righteousness" or "duty," is one of the most important ideas in the Arthashastra. Dharma is a complicated idea with many different parts. It includes things like social order, ethics, and justice. The idea of dharma has had a big impact on Indian society and culture, and it is often used as a guide for how to rule in a fair and ethical way. In this study, I analyse Kautilya's Arthashastra to see how the concept of dharma might be applied to the contemporary world. By an analysis of the Arthashastra, real-world examples, and criticisms, I also explain how dharma may assist policymakers in making decisions that benefit society as a whole and help to the establishment of a more equitable and peaceful world. Then, the Arthashastra's concept of dharma is analysed in further detail. I also examine its numerous facets and their impact on the existing social and political structure.

Historical context of Kautilya's Arthashastra and its significance

It is thought that Kautilya wrote the Arthashastra, an ancient Indian book on statecraft and government, somewhere between the third century BCE and the third century CE. Political thinker and advisor to India's Mauryan Empire's founder, Chandragupta Maurya, Kautilya wrote this work. One of the first writings on economics, diplomacy, and warfare, Arthashastra is considered a classic today. One of ancient India's greatest and most powerful empires, the Mauryan Empire was also renowned for its competent administration and governance. Others claim that Kautilya's Arthashastra was instrumental in influencing the imperial government's policies. It advised monarchs on how to govern their realms, maintain order, and look out for their citizens. Economic policy, international relations, law and justice, administration, and

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military strategy are only few of the many themes covered in the Arthashastra. It offers a wide-ranging analysis of the role of government in modern society, with special focus on the value of moral leadership and the responsibility of the ruler to uphold social justice. The relevance of Kautilya's Arthashastra, written in ancient India, rests in the pragmatic approach to government that it presents. It's illuminating about how an ancient empire functioned and the difficulties its rulers faced in keeping the peace and the economy thriving. The work has affected modern political thought in India and worldwide due to its focus on ethical administration and the welfare of the people.

Concept of Dharma in Kautilya's Arthashastra

Arthashastra, written by the ancient Indian politician Kautilya, offers advice on how to run a government and maintain order. Kautilya, the author of the Arthashastra, describes dharma as "the basic principle that controls the operation of the state and society" (dharma tattvam samhita). Dharma is the moral and ethical standard that directs people, organisations, and communities towards the good life.

Kautilya identifies four main components of dharma, which are:

- **Raja Dharma:** These are the obligations of the monarch or head of state. The king's duty is to safeguard dharma by making sure his people are taken care of, safe from danger, and living in an orderly society.
- **Praja Dharma:** This implies that people are required to uphold certain duties as subjects. To be a good citizen, one must fulfil responsibilities to one's country, to the rule of law, and to the common good.
- **Ashrama Dharma:** This idea is connected to the responsibilities that come with maturing. Everyone is responsible for their immediate and extended families, their children, and their communities.
- **Varna Dharma:** That which is expected of a person according to his or her social status or professional status. There are obligations and roles in society that are unique to each caste or profession.

Kautilya believed that the state was responsible for maintaining morality. It is the job of the state to ensure that there are rules and regulations in place that are fair and effective in achieving these goals. The state is responsible for enforcing these rules and regulations and penalising those who break them.

Relevance of Dharma Today

Kautilya's Arthashastra may have been written over two thousand years ago, but its teachings on dharma remain timeless. Some contemporary applications of Kautilya's dharma talks are as follows:

- **Ethical Governance:** Kautilya says that a leader's morality is very important if dharma is to be kept. This is more important than ever in today's society, where corruption and doing things that aren't right are so common. By acting ethically, leaders can increase trust in their institutions and help keep society stable.
- **Social Justice:** Dharma, one of the most important ideas in the Arthashastra, says that everyone should be treated fairly. At a time when discrimination and unfairness are so common, this is even more important. Governments that uphold dharma help make a fair society where everyone has the same chances of doing well.

- **Sustainable Development:** The dharma teachings of Kautilya emphasise the need of acting responsibly and making judgements that consider the long-term consequences of one's actions. This is particularly significant in the contemporary world, when climate change and environmental harm are a growing concern. Governments and organisations may strive towards sustainable development that preserves the environment and utilises natural resources responsibly if they adhere to dharma.
- **Conflict Resolution:** The dharma teachings of Kautilya emphasise the importance of problem-solving and diplomacy. This is crucial today, when conflicts between nations and groups are a major issue. By adhering to dharma, governments may promote peaceful and diplomatic approaches to problem-solving rather than resorting to violence and hostility.
- **Balancing Personal and Societal Interests:** Dharma offers a framework for juggling one's own needs with those of the larger community. In a world when individuality and self-interest are so prized, preserving dharma may help bring people into harmony with the greater good of society.

Case studies of dharma in action

A number of real-world examples of dharma in action from Kautilya's Arthashastra show how the notion may be used in government and policy. To illustrate, below are a few examples:

- **Taxation policies:** The Arthashastra states that the king is responsible for ensuring that taxes are collected in a fair manner and that the subjects are not subjected to excessive taxation. According to Kautilya, the monarch should tax his people according to their wealth and income, with special consideration given to the destitute and the crippled. The tax money should go towards improving people's lives by funding infrastructure like roads, bridges, and water purification plants.
- **Law and justice:** An unbiased and fair judicial system is emphasised in the Arthashastra. The king has a duty to punish the criminal and defend the innocent, regardless of their social standing or political ties. According to Kautilya, the judge should take into account extenuating circumstances while deciding on a sentence and ensure that the penalty is proportional to the offence.
- **Foreign relations:** The necessity of diplomacy in preserving stability is acknowledged in Arthashastra. Kautilya suggests that the monarch employ all three (diplomacy, alliances, and force) to safeguard the state's interests. The king is responsible for maintaining friendly ties with foreign nations.
- **Public health policies:** Kautilya emphasises the need of personal and public cleanliness. To combat the spread of sickness, he suggests that the king set up hospitals, clinics, and quarantine areas. It's also the king's responsibility to make sure everyone has access to clean water and nutritious meals.
- **Education policies:** Arthashastra states that it is the king's duty to encourage learning and growth of the mind. Kautilya that the monarch set up educational institutions and provide scholarships to bright pupils. The state also has a responsibility to foster innovation in the creative and scientific fields.

Each of these studies provides concrete examples of how the dharma framework might be used in the realms of politics and public policy. Kautilya's focus on moral leadership and citizen well-being as the state's first priority is reflected in these maxims.

Arthashastra's critiques and controversies over the idea of dharma:

Arthashastra's interpretation of the concept of dharma has been the subject of several criticisms and controversies. A major complaint is that the text's utilitarian approach to government puts state interests before of citizens' rights and liberties, which some worry might lead to tyranny. The text's apparent approval of using deceit and violence to attain political ends is particularly divisive since it may be used to rationalise harmful and repressive actions. It has also been argued that the Arthashastra's narrow emphasis on the duties of the state leaves out more universal ethical and spiritual considerations. The text's focus on the king's power and authority may lead to authoritarianism, especially when used to justify repressive actions. Additionally, Arthashastra's understanding of dharma is contentious since it is vague and hence subject to abuses of authority. Controversy has arisen over the text's apparent acceptance of caste-based discrimination and the exclusion of some communities from certain rights and benefits. Others have pointed out that different cultures and societies give rise to different interpretations of Arthashastra's idea of dharma, which they say makes it difficult to apply universally. For example, sociocultural factors like as caste, gender, and class might influence how dharma is implemented in government. Ultimately, these disputes and disagreements show how intricate and nuanced the notion of dharma is throughout Arthashastra. Although the book does give a framework for ethical government, it has been the topic of heated discussion and controversy due to its utilitarian approach, promotion of violence and deceit, and narrow view of dharma.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion of dharma in Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a framework for ethical governance that is still applicable today. The text's focus on the king's responsibility to protect his people, promote justice and social welfare, and enforce ethical norms is still important in modern culture. The Arthashastra's utilitarian approach to government and its promotion of violence and fraud have been the topic of criticism and controversy, but the text's larger focus on ethical behaviour and moral responsibility cannot be underestimated. The continual argument and discussion over the interpretation and application of dharma in Arthashastra demonstrates its enduring relevance and importance in modern culture. In addition, the influence of cultural and socioeconomic diversity on the perception and implementation of dharma emphasises the relevance of context and viewpoint in comprehending the concept's meaning and significance. A thorough knowledge of the notion is crucial for tackling the complex ethical and political concerns confronting contemporary society. Although though the Arthashastra was written in an older literary style, its teachings on governance and ethics are relevant even now.

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