

The Impact of Chanakya's Influence on the Indian Administration: An Overview

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Abstract

This study examines Chanakya's administrative philosophy and assesses its long-term influence on the evolution of governance across successive Indian kingdoms. Traditionally, Chanakya is also known as Kautilya or Vishnu Gupta. His famous book, 'the Arthashastra', is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive treatises on ancient Indian statecraft. Although composed in the context of the Mauryan Empire during the fourth century BCE, its administrative ideas have often been associated with later traditions of governance in the Indian subcontinent.

The study investigates the extent to which Chanakya's political thought can be identified in the administrative structures of later Indian kingdoms, including the Shungas, Satavahanas, Guptas, Harsha's kingdom, the Cholas, the Vijayanagara Empire, the Marathas, and certain administrative institutions under the Mughal Empire. Using a historical-comparative methodology grounded in textual analysis, epigraphic evidence, inscriptions, numismatic records, and contemporary foreign accounts, the article distinguishes between direct textual influence and independent administrative convergence.

This research paper suggests that the influence of the Arthashastra was neither uniform nor continuous. Rather than surviving as a fixed administrative manual, many of its ideas have been absorbed into broader traditions of governance and adapted by different kingdoms to their political and economic needs. Practices such as revenue administration, bureaucratic organization, diplomatic strategy, and the use of intelligence continued to appear in several later states. However, they often took forms that differed from those described in the Arthashastra. In light of Chanakya's Arthashastra, this research paper makes a comparative assessment of the administration of different Indian kingdoms and evaluates Indian administration as a whole, which remains relevant even in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Chanakya; Impact; Arthashastra; Mauryan Empire; Influence; Indian Administration; Comparative Governance.*

Introduction

Among the political thinkers of the ancient world, Chanakya occupies a distinctive place. Also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, he is traditionally associated with the rise of Chandragupta Maurya and the establishment of the Mauryan Empire. His treatise, the Arthashastra, offers a detailed discussion of governance, covering subjects such as taxation, public finance, military organization, diplomacy, espionage, judicial administration, agriculture, trade, urban planning, and foreign policy. Few ancient political works address such a wide range of administrative concerns in a single text.

Unlike many classical texts that primarily discuss ethical ideals or royal virtues, the Arthashastra concentrates on the practical challenges involved in governing a large territorial state. Chanakya argues that political stability depends on sound administration, a strong economy, military preparedness, and effective intelligence gathering. His emphasis throughout the text is on policies that help maintain order and strengthen the state rather than on abstract political

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ideals.

For more than a century, scholars have compared Chanakya with political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Sun Tzu, Aristotle, and Confucius. While these comparisons are useful, they can draw attention away from the development of India's own administrative traditions. This raises an important historical question: to what extent did Chanakya's ideas influence later Indian kingdoms?

The available historical evidence does not point to a simple answer.

Unlike Confucian political thought, which continued to shape state institutions in imperial China for centuries, the Arthashastra appears to have faded from widespread intellectual circulation before its rediscovery by R. Shamasastry in 1905. This creates an important historiographical problem. If the text was no longer widely known, how should historians explain the similarities between Mauryan administration and the institutions of several later Indian kingdoms?

Several explanations have been suggested.

One possibility is that the Arthashastra survived through administrative practice rather than through the continued circulation of the text itself. Another is that later kingdoms developed similar institutions independently because large states often face comparable administrative challenges. A third explanation is that some of these practices reflected broader traditions of Indian political culture instead of being uniquely Chanakyan.

The present study examines these competing explanations by drawing on historical evidence from literary sources, inscriptions, epigraphy, and administrative records rather than relying on broad theoretical assumptions.

Literature Review

Scholarly interest in Chanakya expanded dramatically following the publication of the Sanskrit manuscript of the Arthashastra by R. Shamasastry in 1909. Before this discovery, Chanakya was known primarily through literary traditions preserved in Buddhist, Jain, and Sanskrit narratives.

R. P. Kangle's critical edition remains the most authoritative philological study of the Arthashastra. His work established the textual history, linguistic features, and probable chronology of the text while cautioning against attributing every section to a single historical author.

A. L. Basham emphasized that the Arthashastra demonstrates an unexpectedly sophisticated level of administrative organization within ancient India, challenging colonial assumptions that pre-modern Indian political institutions lacked systematic governance.

Romila Thapar argued that the Mauryan Empire represented an unprecedented experiment in political centralization. However, she also noted that administrative continuity after the Mauryan collapse varied considerably across regions.

Upinder Singh has highlighted the diversity of political institutions throughout ancient India, cautioning historians against viewing the Mauryan state as a universal template for later kingdoms.

R. S. Sharma interpreted the Arthashastra primarily through the lens of historical materialism, emphasizing fiscal administration, agrarian surplus extraction, and class relations rather than purely political philosophy.

Burton Stein challenged traditional narratives of centralized governance in medieval South India, proposing the influential "segmentary state" model for the Chola Empire. His interpretation raises important questions regarding the applicability of Chanakyan administrative principles to decentralized kingdoms.

K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's extensive work on the Cholas, however, demonstrates that sophisticated revenue administration, military organization, and commercial regulation existed alongside local autonomy, suggesting that centralization and decentralization need not be mutually exclusive.

Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes that Indian political traditions cannot be understood solely through either textual analysis or archaeological evidence. Instead, administrative continuity must be reconstructed through an

interdisciplinary examination of inscriptions, coins, literary sources, diplomatic records, and accounts of foreign travel.

Despite substantial scholarship on the Mauryan Empire itself, comparatively little research systematically investigates Chanakya's influence across multiple dynasties over nearly two thousand years. Existing studies usually focus on individual kingdoms rather than examining broader institutional continuity.

Research Gap

Although the Arthashastra has generated extensive scholarship concerning Mauryan administration, relatively few studies address its long-term historical influence across successive Indian kingdoms.

Three significant gaps remain.

First, previous research often assumes either complete continuity or complete discontinuity without adequately distinguishing between direct borrowing and institutional similarity.

Second, comparative analysis across multiple dynasties remains limited. Most studies examine Mauryan administration in isolation from later political developments.

Third, few historians have proposed a systematic framework for classifying different forms of Chanakyan influence..

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the administrative philosophy of Chanakya as presented in the Arthashastra.
2. To investigate the extent of continuity between Mauryan institutions and later Indian kingdoms.
3. To compare governance structures across major dynasties from the Shungas to the Marathas.
4. To distinguish between direct influence, inherited institutional traditions, and independent political evolution.
5. To evaluate Chanakya's contribution to the development of Indian political thought.

Methodology

The present research adopts a qualitative historical-comparative methodology.

Primary sources include the Arthashastra, the Indica (through later classical quotations), inscriptions, copperplate grants, coins, royal edicts, and literary chronicles such as the Harshacharita and the Rajatarangini. Foreign travel accounts by Chinese pilgrims and Portuguese observers are also consulted where relevant.

Secondary sources consist of modern historical monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, archaeological reports, and critical editions of primary texts.

The study employs comparative institutional analysis to identify similarities and differences in administrative structures across successive dynasties. Rather than assuming that similarity necessarily implies influence, evidence is classified into three analytical categories:

Historical Background

The political landscape of northern India during the fourth century BCE was characterized by profound instability and fragmentation. The decline of the Mahajanapadas had given rise to several regional kingdoms competing for political supremacy. Among these, the Nanda dynasty emerged as the dominant power in the Gangetic plains, ruling from Pataliputra with considerable military and economic resources. Classical accounts describe the Nandas as possessing one of the largest standing armies of the ancient world, supported by extensive taxation and centralized authority. However, despite its administrative strength, later literary traditions portray the dynasty as increasingly unpopular due to heavy taxation, autocratic governance, and the perceived illegitimacy of its rule.

The geopolitical situation was further complicated by Alexander the Great's invasion of northwestern India in 326 BCE. Although Alexander's campaign extended only to the Punjab before his army refused to advance further east, the invasion disrupted existing political arrangements and exposed weaknesses in the fragmented regional order. After Alexander died in 323 BCE, his eastern territories were incorporated into the Seleucid Empire, creating new diplomatic and military challenges for the Indian subcontinent.

Within this context emerged Chanakya, also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta. While details of his life remain uncertain and are often embellished by later traditions, there is broad scholarly agreement that he played a significant role in the rise of Chandragupta Maurya.

Buddhist, Jain, and Sanskrit literary traditions differ in their narratives but converge in portraying Chanakya as the principal strategist behind the overthrow of the Nanda dynasty and the establishment of the Mauryan Empire.

The Mauryan state represented a qualitative transformation in Indian political organization. Unlike earlier kingdoms that were often regional in scope, the Mauryan Empire established a highly centralized administrative system extending across much of the Indian subcontinent. Provincial administration, standardized taxation, permanent military organization, and a sophisticated bureaucracy became defining characteristics of Mauryan governance.

The Arthashastra provides the most comprehensive theoretical articulation of this administrative system. Whether composed entirely by Chanakya or compiled over several generations remains debated. Nevertheless, the text offers unparalleled insight into the principles underlying early Indian statecraft. Rather than functioning merely as a descriptive account of Mauryan institutions, it presents an idealized administrative manual intended to guide rulers in establishing political stability, economic prosperity, and military security.

Understanding this administrative framework is essential before evaluating whether later Indian kingdoms inherited, modified, or independently recreated similar institutions.

Core Principles of the Arthashastra

The Arthashastra is frequently described as a treatise on political science; however, this characterization understates its scope. The text is better understood as an encyclopedic manual of governance that encompasses constitutional theory, public administration, economics, military science, jurisprudence, diplomacy, intelligence, and the ethics of rulership.

Its underlying philosophy rests upon the belief that political order is the indispensable foundation of social and economic life.

Theory of the State: The Saptanga Model of Chanakya

Chanakya conceptualizes the state as an organic entity composed of seven interdependent elements (Saptanga):

1. Swamin (the king)
2. Amatya (ministers)
3. Janapada (territory and population)
4. Durga (fortifications)
5. Kosha (treasury)

6. Danda (army)

7. Mitra (allies)

Unlike modern constitutional theories, which often prioritize legal institutions, the Saptanga model emphasizes functional interdependence. A wealthy treasury without military protection, or a capable army without economic support, was considered inherently unstable.

This systems-oriented conception of governance distinguishes the Arthashastra from many contemporary political traditions.

Chanakya's views on Kingship and Political Authority

Chanakya rejects both unrestricted despotism and passive idealism. The king is presented as the guardian of public welfare, whose legitimacy depends on administrative competence rather than on mere hereditary succession.

The famous maxim,

“Prajā Sukhi, Sukhi Rajyam; Prajanam chha hiteahitam” (*In the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king*)

However, welfare is understood pragmatically. Prosperous subjects increase agricultural production, commercial activity, tax revenue, and ultimately state stability. The ruler is expected to maintain a disciplined daily schedule devoted almost entirely to administration, consultation, judicial hearings, intelligence reports, and military planning.

Bureaucratic Administration as described in the Arthashastra

The greatest innovation of the Arthashastra lies in its extraordinary bureaucratic detail. The text identifies numerous specialized officials, including:

- Treasurer
- Revenue collector
- Superintendent of commerce • Superintendent of mines
- Superintendent of forests
- Superintendent of agriculture
- Superintendent of ports
- Superintendent of armories
- City administrator
- Customs officers
- Judicial officers

Each office possessed clearly defined responsibilities, salaries, inspection mechanisms, and penalties for corruption.

Such administrative specialization anticipates principles associated with modern public administration, including division of labour, accountability, and fiscal auditing.

Economic Administration as described in the Arthashastra

Economic policy occupies nearly one-third of the Arthashastra, underscoring Chanakya's conviction that financial strength constitutes the foundation of political power.

Major economic principles include:

- Progressive taxation
- Agricultural expansion • Irrigation projects
- Regulation of trade
- Standardized weights and measures
- State monopolies in strategic industries • Mining administration
- Forest management • Disaster relief • Grain storage
- Price stabilization

The state actively intervenes in economic life not to suppress markets but to maintain stability and prevent exploitation.

This approach differs substantially from both laissez-faire capitalism and complete state socialism.

Espionage and Intelligence as described in the Arthashastra

No aspect of the Arthashastra has attracted greater public fascination than its elaborate intelligence system.

Chanakya describes an extensive network of covert agents operating throughout the kingdom. These include agents disguised as: *Ascetics, Merchants, Students, Householders, Wandering monks & Entertainers*

Their functions extended beyond foreign intelligence to include:

- Detection of corruption
- Monitoring provincial officials
- Counter-intelligence
- Public opinion assessment
- Criminal investigations &
- Military reconnaissance

Importantly, espionage formed part of routine governance rather than emergency warfare.

Military Organization as described in the Arthashastra

The Mauryan military was conceived as a permanent professional institution rather than a temporary wartime force.

Its principal components were as follows: -

1. Infantry

2. Cavalry
3. Chariots
4. War elephants

Under the military organization, it was the brainchild of Chanakya that further emphasized on the following strategies:

Logistics, Recruitment, Training, Supply chains, Military engineering, Fortification & Defensive strategy.

Obviously, victory depended not solely on battlefield courage, but also on preparation, intelligence, and economic sustainability.

Foreign Policy as described in the Arthashastra

Among Chanakya's most influential theoretical contributions is the Mandala Theory. According to this framework:

- Immediate neighbours are potential rivals.
- The enemy's enemy is a potential ally.
- Alliances are fluid rather than permanent.
- Foreign policy must remain adaptable.

Shadgunya or six measures of foreign policy

Chanakya describes the following: 06 (six) foreign policies: -

- (i) Peace (Sandhi)
- (ii) War (Vigraha)
- (iii) Neutrality (Asana)
- (iv) Military preparation (Yana)
- (v) Seeking protection (Samsraya)
- (vi) Dual policy (Dvaidhibhava)

Complementing these strategies are the following Upayas or remedies, which have been suggested by Chanakya:

- Conciliation (Sama) • Gifts (Dana)
- Division (Bheda) • Force (Danda)
- War (Vigraha) • Neutrality (Asana)
- Military preparation (Yana)
- Seeking protection (Samsraya)
- Dual policy (Dvaidhibhava)

These concepts reveal an unusually sophisticated understanding of interstate relations and continue to attract interest within modern strategic studies.⁹ Continuity after the Mauryas: The Shunga, Kanva, and Satavahana Kingdoms.

The collapse of the Mauryan Empire around 185 BCE has traditionally been interpreted as marking the end of centralized imperial administration. However, recent scholarship suggests a more nuanced picture.

Although imperial political authority fragmented, several administrative institutions have survived in modified forms.

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of the Shunga Dynasty (c. 185-73 BCE)

Founded by Pushyamitra Shunga following the assassination of the last Mauryan ruler, the Shunga dynasty inherited much of the administrative infrastructure of the Gangetic heartland. Evidence indicates continuity in:

- provincial administration, • taxation,
- military organization, • revenue collection.

While surviving literary evidence is limited, archaeological remains and inscriptions suggest that many Mauryan administrative practices continued despite changes in dynastic leadership.

The Shungas did not reconstruct the Mauryan Empire in its entirety, but neither did they abandon centralized governance.

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of the Kanva Dynasty

The Kanvas ruled for only a few decades, and surviving evidence is sparse. Nevertheless, numismatic and literary records indicate continued reliance upon existing bureaucratic institutions rather than the creation of entirely new administrative systems.

This continuity illustrates an important historical principle: dynastic change does not necessarily imply institutional rupture.

Administrative structures often outlive the rulers who created them.

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of the Gupta Empire

The Gupta Empire (c. 320-550 CE) is frequently described as the “Classical Age” of Indian civilization because of its remarkable achievements in literature, mathematics, astronomy, art, and political organization. Although separated from the Mauryan Empire by nearly six centuries, Gupta administration exhibits several striking similarities with the political principles articulated in the Arthashastra. Determining whether these similarities represent direct intellectual inheritance or independent administrative evolution remains one of the central questions of Indian historiography.

Unlike the Mauryas, whose administration was highly centralized, the Guptas adopted a comparatively flexible administrative model. Provincial governors (Uparikas), district officers (Vishayapatis), and village assemblies exercised considerable authority over local affairs. Nevertheless, this decentralization did not imply administrative weakness. Rather, it reflected an adaptation of centralized principles to changing political realities.

One of the most significant continuities lies in fiscal administration. Gupta inscriptions reveal a sophisticated taxation system encompassing land revenue, customs duties, commercial taxes, forest products, and professional levies. These categories closely resemble the diversified revenue structure described in the Arthashastra. Chanakya repeatedly emphasized that dependence upon a single source of revenue endangered state stability, advocating a balanced fiscal system capable of sustaining military, administrative, and public welfare expenditures.

Military organization likewise demonstrates notable continuity. The Guptas maintained permanent armed forces supported by provincial contingents and allied rulers. Fortifications remained essential components of imperial defence, echoing Chanakya’s classification of forts as one of the indispensable limbs of the state (Durga).

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of Harsha’s Kingdom

Following the political fragmentation that accompanied the decline of the Gupta Empire, northern India witnessed the emergence of several regional kingdoms. Among these, the kingdom of Harsha (606-647 CE) occupies a particularly significant place because of the relatively abundant literary and foreign evidence available for his reign.

Two principal sources illuminate Harsha’s administration: Harshacharita and the travel account of the Chinese

Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang. Although both sources possess literary and ideological biases, together they provide valuable insights into early medieval governance.

Revenue administration continued to form the backbone of state authority. Agricultural taxation remained the principal source of royal income, supplemented by customs duties and commercial taxation. Public expenditure supported military forces, religious institutions, and charitable activities.

Judicial administration also reflected organized governmental oversight. Xuanzang describes regular royal inspections, public hearings, and attention to justice, although punishments appear generally less severe than those recommended in the Arthashastra.

Harsha maintained a substantial standing army, including infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots. Military organization therefore retained the combined-arms structure emphasized by Chanakya, although cavalry had assumed greater strategic importance than during the Mauryan period.

Overall, Harsha's kingdom demonstrates selective continuity rather than direct adherence to Chanakyan doctrine.

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of the Chola Empire: Decentralization within a Chanakyan Framework

The Chola Empire (c. 850-1279 CE) presents one of the most intriguing challenges for evaluating Chanakya's influence. At first glance, the Cholas appear fundamentally different from the Mauryan state. Their celebrated system of village self-government, documented through inscriptions from Uttaramerur and other sites, suggests extensive local autonomy seemingly inconsistent with the centralized bureaucracy envisioned in the Arthashastra.

The Chola state successfully combined decentralized local administration with centralized fiscal, military, and diplomatic control.

Village assemblies (Sabha and Ur) exercised authority over irrigation, land management, taxation, and local justice. However, imperial officials continued to supervise revenue collection, maintain military organization, regulate overseas commerce, and coordinate large-scale public works.

Chanakya himself did not advocate unnecessary centralization. Rather, he emphasized administrative efficiency. From this perspective, delegated local authority remains fully compatible with Chanakyan principles provided that it strengthens rather than weakens state capacity.

The Cholas developed one of the most sophisticated revenue systems in medieval Asia. Extensive land surveys enabled accurate taxation, while irrigation projects significantly increased agricultural productivity. These policies closely parallel Chanakya's recommendations concerning agricultural expansion, irrigation, and fiscal planning.

Intelligence operations are less clearly documented than in the Mauryan period. Nevertheless, diplomatic success in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia implies effective information gathering and strategic planning.

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of the Vijayanagara Empire

The establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire in 1336 CE marked a decisive turning point in medieval Indian political history. Founded by Harihara I and Bukka Raya I in the aftermath of the Delhi Sultanate's expansion into southern India, the empire evolved into one of the largest and most prosperous states in pre-modern South Asia.

The central administration was headed by the monarch, assisted by a council of ministers responsible for finance, military affairs, foreign relations, justice, and provincial administration. Although the titles and institutional arrangements differed from those described by Chanakya, their functional organization displays striking similarities.

The Arthashastra emphasized specialization of administrative offices, arguing that efficient governance depended upon clearly defined responsibilities and systematic supervision.

Vijayanagara adopted precisely such an approach, assigning distinct portfolios to experienced officials while maintaining centralized oversight.

The empire's military organization likewise reflects enduring strategic principles. Permanent standing armies, fortified cities, war elephants, cavalry, and extensive logistical planning enabled Vijayanagar to sustain prolonged campaigns against neighbouring states. Chanakya repeatedly argued that military success depended less upon numerical superiority than upon preparation, intelligence, and economic endurance. Vijayanagar's repeated military recoveries following setbacks illustrate this philosophy in practice.

The influence of Chanakya on the administration of Shivaji and the Maratha State

Few rulers in Indian history invite comparison with Chanakya more readily than Shivaji. Both emerged during periods of political instability, challenged established imperial powers, relied on strategic innovation rather than overwhelming military strength, and constructed administrative institutions that emphasized efficiency over hereditary privilege.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Shivaji's administration and the Arthashastra requires careful historical evaluation.

The Maratha state developed under circumstances fundamentally different from those confronting Chandragupta Maurya. Mughal military superiority, difficult terrain, and limited financial resources compelled Shivaji to adopt highly mobile methods of warfare emphasizing speed, intelligence, and surprise. While Chanakya discussed guerrilla tactics only briefly, his broader emphasis upon adaptability, deception, and strategic flexibility resonates strongly with Maratha military practice.

The Ashta Pradhan (Council of Eight Ministers) constituted the administrative nucleus of Shivaji's government. Each minister supervised a specialized department, including finance, foreign affairs, military administration, justice, and religious matters. This departmental organization closely parallels the administrative specialization advocated in the Arthashastra, although institutional details differ substantially.

Revenue reforms introduced under Shivaji further illustrate sophisticated fiscal administration. Systematic land surveys enabled more equitable taxation while reducing dependence upon intermediary landlords. Such measures reflect Chanakya's repeated insistence that direct supervision of revenue collection minimized corruption and strengthened state authority.

Espionage formed another cornerstone of Maratha success. Contemporary accounts indicate that Shivaji maintained extensive intelligence networks monitoring Mughal troop movements, political developments, and regional alliances. Information frequently determined military decisions, consistent with Chanakya's assertion that knowledge constitutes one of the ruler's greatest strategic assets.

Fortifications occupied an equally central position. Shivaji developed an interconnected system of hill forts serving simultaneously as military bases, administrative centers, supply depots, and symbols of political authority. Chanakya regarded forts (Durga) as indispensable components of state security, recommending that rulers maintain multiple fortified centers capable of sustaining prolonged resistance during invasion.

The Maratha state therefore represents one of the strongest historical examples of Chanakyan administrative principles reflected in later Indian political institutions, even in the absence of explicit documentary evidence of dependence.

Conclusion

Chanakya occupies a unique position in the history of political thought. Unlike many ancient philosophers whose works emphasize ethical ideals or metaphysical speculation, the Arthashastra presents a comprehensive theory of governance rooted in administrative efficiency, economic management, military preparedness, and strategic diplomacy. Its remarkable breadth has few parallels in the ancient world.

This study demonstrates that although explicit documentary references to the Arthashastra become increasingly scarce after the Mauryan period, numerous administrative principles continued to appear in subsequent Indian kingdoms. Fiscal administration, bureaucratic specialization, strategic diplomacy, public works, agricultural development, and treasury management exhibit substantial continuity across diverse political contexts.

The Gupta Empire modified Mauryan centralization through greater provincial autonomy. The Cholas combined local self-government with imperial fiscal control. Vijayanagara integrated commercial expansion into traditional administrative structures. The Marathas transformed strategic flexibility into highly mobile warfare suited to early modern conditions.

Ultimately, Chanakya's greatest legacy lies not in the survival of particular offices or regulations but in the enduring conception of governance as a disciplined synthesis of economics, administration, diplomacy, intelligence, and public welfare. In this respect, the Arthashastra remains one of humanity's most sophisticated contributions to the study of statecraft.

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