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BEYOND POLITICAL REALISM: STATE POWER, POLITICAL ETHICS, AND PUBLIC WELFARE IN KAUTILYA'S ARTHASHASTRA

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ABSTRACT

Kautilya's Arthashastra is often read as a classic of political realism because of its attention to power, security, intelligence, diplomacy, and strategic calculation. A purely power-centred reading, however, can obscure its treatment of administration, economic conditions, and the ruler's responsibilities toward the population. This article examines how political effectiveness, public welfare, and normative legitimacy relate in the Arthashastra. Through philosophical textual analysis and critical engagement with scholarship, it argues that Kautilya's statecraft can be read as institutionally grounded political realism: political stability is linked to administrative capacity and the social and economic conditions of the population. Yet welfare does not automatically legitimate power; coercion, manipulation, and hierarchy remain open to criticism. A limited comparison with Machiavelli clarifies the usefulness and limits of realist interpretations. The article offers a three-part framework for distinguishing effectiveness, welfare, and legitimacy in comparative political philosophy.

Keywords: Arthashastra; Indian political philosophy; Kautilya; political ethics; political realism; public welfare

1. INTRODUCTION

Political philosophy repeatedly returns to a difficult question: should political authority be judged primarily by its capacity to maintain order and achieve practical objectives, or must it also be assessed by the purposes it serves and the means through which it acts? The problem becomes especially acute when governments face insecurity, competition, limited resources, and conflicts between collective objectives and individual interests. Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a rich historical setting in which to examine this tension. Its discussions of kingship, administration, law, economic management, diplomacy, intelligence, and warfare make it one of the most wide-ranging works of classical Indian political thought..

The Arthashastra is frequently presented as a realist text. Its attention to political calculation, strategic alliances, intelligence gathering, coercion, and the preservation of state power supports that interpretation. Kautilya does not assume that political life can be governed by benevolent intention alone. A ruler must assess circumstances, anticipate opponents, manage resources, and understand the consequences of decisions. Nevertheless, a description of these realist features does not settle the question of their normative meaning. Political strategy may be necessary for governing, but necessity does not by itself establish that every effective measure is justified. (Kautilya; Kangle; Dar). (Kautilya, bks. 6–7; Boesche; Dar).

The text also considers administrative responsibility and the material conditions of social life. The ruler's interests are repeatedly connected to the prosperity and security of the population,

while agriculture, trade, taxation, public works, and the conduct of officials are treated as central matters of government. This makes it difficult to reduce the Arthashastra to a manual of personal ambition. At the same time, it would be historically misleading to equate its monarchical order with a modern democratic welfare state or a contemporary theory of individual rights (Kautilya; Olivelle). (Kautilya 1.19.34; 2.1, 2.16, 2.24, 4.3).

This article argues that Kautilya's political philosophy is best understood as institutionally grounded political realism: a form of practical political reasoning in which the durability of authority is linked to administrative capacity and the conditions of collective life. The phrase is used here as an analytical description, not as a term attributed to Kautilya himself. The argument has three parts. First, effectiveness, public welfare, and political legitimacy are related but distinct standards of evaluation. Second, the Arthashastra connects the stability of the state with the economic and social conditions of its population. Third, this connection does not remove the need to evaluate coercion, hierarchy, and strategic manipulation critically. The article proceeds by reviewing relevant scholarship, explaining its method, and analysing political authority, danda, political ethics, and welfare. It then compares selected aspects of Kautilya's thought with Machiavelli before considering the limits and contemporary relevance of the proposed framework. Its contribution is deliberately modest: it does not claim that the relationship between pragmatism and ethics in Kautilya has been overlooked. Rather, it offers a clear evaluative distinction among effectiveness, welfare, and legitimacy to organise that established debate.

2. REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP AND THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Textual and historical scholarship is essential to any interpretation of the Arthashastra. R. P. Kangle's critical edition, translation, and study remain foundational resources for understanding the text's terminology and structure. Patrick Olivelle's translation and study situate the work within the history of ancient Indian political and legal thought and provide a modern scholarly basis for close reading. These works caution against relying on popular summaries or treating the Arthashastra as if it were a collection of isolated maxims detached from its wider administrative and intellectual context. (Kangle; Olivelle).

Scholarship has also situated Kautilya within debates about political realism. Arshid Iqbal Dar argues that Kautilya's Arthashastra can challenge Eurocentric accounts of the intellectual origins of realism and can provide a non-Western conceptual resource for analysing statecraft and regional diplomacy. This intervention is important because it broadens the history of political thought beyond a narrative centred exclusively on European theorists. However, establishing Kautilya's relevance to realism does not itself answer whether the text treats political utility as the only standard by which action should be judged. (Dar).

The relationship between pragmatism and morality has been addressed directly by Shreya Bhattacharya and Kankana Saikia, whose study asks whether political pragmatism and ethics in the Arthashastra are contradictory or complementary. Prem Poddar's discussion of the differential uses of Kautilya's text likewise examines the ethical and political implications of its account of welfare, including its later interpretation in relation to social choice and justice. This literature means that the present article cannot credibly claim to be the first to connect Kautilya with political ethics or public welfare. (Bhattacharya and Saikia; Poddar; Strand).

A more precise research problem is therefore needed. Discussions of Kautilya often move among three claims that should not be treated as equivalent: that a measure is effective in preserving authority; that it improves the welfare of the population; and that it is normatively justified. These claims may support one another, but they can also diverge. A measure may preserve the state while harming particular groups. A policy may raise aggregate prosperity while distributing benefits unequally. A ruler may describe coercion as necessary for public security without showing that its scope or consequences are justified.

The article's contribution is to make this three-part distinction explicit and use it to interpret the relation between state power and welfare in the Arthashastra. It asks: (1) how does the text connect political authority to order and administrative capacity? (2) what role does the welfare of subjects play in the ruler's conception of political success? and (3) why does this relationship remain insufficient to establish the moral legitimacy of every political means? The argument is a critical reconstruction of published scholarship and primary-text interpretation, rather than a claim of an entirely unprecedented discovery.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This is a qualitative work of philosophical textual analysis and comparative political philosophy. The primary source is Kautilya's Arthashastra, consulted through scholarly translations and studies, especially those associated with Kangle and Olivelle. Secondary scholarship is used to situate the text within debates about realism, ethics, welfare, and the interpretation of ancient Indian political thought. The comparison with Machiavelli is limited to selected questions about political necessity, leadership, and the preservation of authority; it does not assume direct influence or conceptual identity (Kautilya; Kangle; Olivelle). (Kautilya; Kangle, *Study*; Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law*).

Three analytical terms structure the discussion. Political effectiveness means the capacity of political institutions and decisions to achieve their stated purposes, such as maintaining order, defending the state, collecting revenue, or administering public affairs. Public welfare refers to the conditions in which the population can maintain security and economic and social life. Political legitimacy concerns the justification of authority and the acceptability of the purposes and methods through which it is exercised. These are contemporary analytical categories used to clarify the text, not claims that Kautilya formulated them in the same vocabulary or institutional form.

Analytical Matrix: Effectiveness, Welfare, and Legitimacy

Dimension	Questions for reading the Arthashastra	Critical test
Political effectiveness	Can the state maintain order, protect territory, administer revenue, and coordinate officials?	Does practical success depend on coercion or methods whose costs require separate justification?
Public welfare	How do policies affect security, productive activity, material conditions, and the ruler's responsibilities toward subjects?	Who benefits, who bears the costs, and are benefits distributed unequally?
Political legitimacy	Can the purposes and means of political authority be justified beyond the fact that they are effective?	Are coercion, surveillance, deception, and burdens proportionate and normatively defensible?

The matrix is an analytical device developed for this article. It does not attribute modern concepts of legitimacy or welfare-state theory to Kautilya; instead, it separates questions that can otherwise be conflated when evaluating political action.

The method has limitations. The Arthashastra is a historically situated treatise, and its composition, layers, and relation to political practice have been the subject of scholarship. It should not be treated as a transparent record of a single ruler's policies or as a modern constitutional document. Nor can a theoretical reading establish the actual social effects of every recommendation. The article therefore makes interpretive and normative claims, not empirical claims about policy outcomes in ancient India (Trautmann; Olivelle, "Manu and the Arthasastra").

4. Political Authority, Danda, and the Organisation of the State

The Arthashastra treats government as an organised structure rather than simply an expression of a ruler's personal will. Its concern with officials, revenue, productive activity, law, security, diplomacy, and military resources indicates that political power depends on multiple interrelated capacities. A ruler may possess ambition or force, but neither guarantees durable government if administration is unreliable, information is poor, public resources are mismanaged, or productive activity is undermined. Authority is made effective through institutions, procedures, and the coordination of resources (Kautilya; Kangle). (Kautilya 1.10; 2.1, 2.16, 2.24).

This institutional perspective complicates the image of Kautilya as merely a theorist of intrigue. Strategy is important, but it operates within a wider account of state organisation. The ruler must understand the condition of the treasury, the capacities of officials, the security of territory, and the circumstances of the population. Political success therefore depends on maintaining a functioning system, not merely defeating a rival or consolidating personal control (Kautilya; Olivelle).

The concept of danda—often rendered as punishment, coercive authority, or the power to enforce order—occupies a significant place in this account. Rules that cannot be enforced may fail to regulate conduct, and a state unable to protect its population may be unable to fulfil basic political functions. Yet the necessity of coercive capacity should be distinguished from the justification of every coercive act. The claim that enforcement is sometimes required does not prove that any degree of surveillance, punishment, or force is proportionate or legitimate (Kautilya; Kangle). (Kautilya 1.2–1.4, especially 1.4.13–14).

The issue is one of institutional judgment. Weak enforcement may allow disorder or predation; arbitrary enforcement may produce fear, resentment, and insecurity. In contemporary terms, one might describe this as the problem of governing through authority without allowing authority to become indistinguishable from unchecked power. This phrasing is an analytical translation, not an assertion that the Arthashastra advocates modern constitutional checks and balances. Its monarchical framework differs substantially from contemporary systems of accountability.

The text's concern with officials and administrative misconduct also has philosophical significance. The ruler's responsibilities cannot be discharged by intention alone. Corruption, misuse of resources, and unreliable administration can defeat a policy's stated purpose.

Effective government requires systems for supervising agents and detecting misconduct. Nevertheless, administrative efficiency is not equivalent to justice. An efficient administration may implement exclusionary or hierarchical rules. Institutional capacity is an important criterion for evaluating government, but it is not a sufficient one (Kautilya; Olivelle). (Kautilya 1.11–1.12; 2.8–2.9).

5. Political Realism and the Ethics of Power

Political realism directs attention to circumstances that idealised accounts of government may neglect: competition, uncertainty, strategic opponents, limited resources, and the possibility that good intentions will not produce good outcomes. The Arthashastra's discussions of diplomacy, intelligence, alliances, and warfare reflect this practical orientation. A ruler must consider not only what ought to happen in an ideal situation but also what is likely to happen under actual conditions of political conflict (Kautilya; Dar). (Kautilya, bks. 6–7; Dar).

Yet realism can be understood in different ways. As a descriptive approach, it emphasises the role of power and strategic calculation in political life. As a normative position, it may be used to argue that the preservation of power should take priority over other standards. The first claim does not logically entail the second. Recognising that rulers face difficult choices is not the same as accepting that whatever succeeds is justified (Dar; Bhattacharya and Saikia).

This distinction matters when evaluating political necessity. A measure may be strategically intelligent and still be ethically objectionable. Conversely, a policy adopted for moral reasons may fail if it ignores foreseeable risks or lacks the institutional capacity to achieve its purpose. Political prudence and moral permission are different questions: prudence concerns whether a means is effective under given circumstances, while moral permission concerns whether the means is acceptable. They may coincide, but neither guarantees the other.

An unrestricted appeal to necessity risks circular reasoning. A ruler identifies the interests of the state, declares a measure essential to those interests, and then treats the claimed necessity as sufficient justification. But the interests of the ruler, the stability of the state, the security of the population, and the welfare of particular groups are not identical. A policy may advance one objective while damaging another. Critical evaluation must therefore ask whose interests are protected, what costs are imposed, whether the costs are proportionate, and whether less harmful alternatives are available.

These questions are not presented as rules explicitly formulated by Kautilya in modern rights-based language. They are contemporary normative questions applied to the text in order to clarify its implications. This approach avoids two errors: treating the Arthashastra as a complete moral ideal and reducing it to a doctrine that all means are permissible whenever they advance political success. The text's practical intelligence is philosophically significant precisely because it invites examination of how effectiveness, responsibility, and political ends are related.

6. Public Welfare and the Ruler's Responsibilities

The Arthashastra links the ruler's interests to the condition of the subjects. A well-known passage, commonly translated as stating that the king's happiness lies in the happiness of the subjects and his benefit in what benefits them, has become central to modern discussions of

Kautilya and welfare. The passage challenges a purely personal conception of political advantage: the ruler's durable interests cannot be separated entirely from the security and prosperity of the governed. (Kautilya; Poddar). (Kautilya 1.19.34; Boesche; Poddar).

The statement should not be inflated into a claim that Kautilya developed modern democratic equality or an unconditional theory of individual rights. The political order of the Arthashastra is hierarchical and monarchical. Its significance is narrower but still important: it establishes a relationship between the welfare of subjects and the proper interests of the ruler. Public welfare is relevant to political success, not merely a private act of royal generosity (Olivelle; Strand).

The text's attention to agriculture, trade, taxation, resource management, public works, and official conduct reinforces this relationship. Political authority depends on material conditions. Productive activity generates resources, while insecurity, excessive extraction, and administrative corruption can undermine the basis of state capacity. Revenue policy is therefore not simply a question of how much the state can collect at a given moment; it also concerns whether economic activity can continue over time. (Kautilya; Kangle; Olivelle). (Kautilya 2.1, 2.16, 2.24, 4.3).

This reasoning has an instrumental dimension. The population's welfare can matter because it supports the stability and resources of the state. But instrumental value is not identical to intrinsic value. If people are protected only because they are useful to the ruler, their welfare remains subordinate to political utility. An intrinsic account, by contrast, treats the well-being of individuals as important even when doing so does not maximise immediate state advantage. The Arthashastra provides material for examining this tension, but it should not be represented as having resolved it according to contemporary egalitarian standards (Poddar; Strand).

Welfare itself is not a single, unambiguous outcome. Security, prosperity, access to resources, and protection from arbitrary conduct can reinforce one another, but they can also conflict. A policy may increase aggregate wealth while distributing benefits unequally; it may preserve order while restricting freedoms; it may improve administration while placing disproportionate burdens on a vulnerable group. Consequently, public welfare must be examined not only in terms of aggregate outcomes but also in terms of distribution, methods, and costs.

This distinction gives the welfare dimension of Kautilya's thought continuing philosophical relevance. Modern governments also confront tensions among taxation, economic development, public services, security, and distributive justice. The comparison is analytical rather than institutional: contemporary welfare states operate within constitutional, democratic, and legal arrangements unlike the monarchical world of the Arthashastra. Kautilya offers questions about the relationship between material conditions and political authority, not a ready-made blueprint for modern policy.

7. Kautilya and Machiavelli: A Critical Comparison

Kautilya and Niccolò Machiavelli are often compared because both examine political leadership in circumstances of uncertainty, rivalry, and possible conflict. The Arthashastra discusses strategic calculation, diplomacy, intelligence, and the preservation of authority; The

Prince examines the qualities and decisions required for a ruler to acquire and maintain political power. Both challenge the idea that political leadership can be understood solely through the personal virtue or benevolent intention of the ruler. (Dar; Boesche). (Kautilya, bks. 6–7; Machiavelli, chs. 15, 17–18, 20; Dar).

The comparison is useful, but it must be carefully limited. The works emerged in different historical and intellectual settings and organise their concerns differently. The Arthashastra is a broad treatise on administration, economic management, law, security, diplomacy, and warfare. The Prince concentrates more directly on princely rule and the acquisition and maintenance of authority, while Machiavelli's wider political thought must also be considered through works such as the Discourses on Livy. It would therefore be inaccurate to treat either author as reducible to one slogan about power (Kautilya; Machiavelli).

Both traditions recognise that political decisions must account for opponents' behaviour and the likely consequences of action. However, shared attention to necessity does not prove that either thinker regards political success as sufficient moral justification. A rigorous comparison examines specific concepts and arguments rather than relying on the popular label 'Machiavellian' as a substitute for textual analysis.

The comparison also raises a methodological concern. Calling Kautilya an 'Indian Machiavelli' may help readers locate him within familiar debates, but it can make European categories the default measure of Indian political thought. Dar's discussion of Kautilya and realism is relevant because it questions Eurocentric accounts of the intellectual sources of realist analysis. A comparative method should neither isolate Kautilya from wider debate nor assimilate him to Machiavelli. It should identify shared problems while preserving historical differences (Dar; Poddar).

For this article, the most productive point of comparison is the relationship between strategic effectiveness and normative evaluation. Both texts show why political action cannot be understood without attention to circumstances. Neither observation removes the contemporary reader's responsibility to ask whether particular means are justifiable. Comparison thus helps locate Kautilya within a global history of political thought while leaving open the distinctiveness of his concepts and institutional concerns.

8. DISCUSSION:

Effectiveness, Welfare, and Legitimacy

The analysis suggests a three-part framework for evaluating political authority. Effectiveness concerns the capacity to achieve political objectives. Welfare concerns the condition of the population and the distribution of benefits and burdens. Legitimacy concerns whether authority and its methods can be justified. The three dimensions can reinforce one another, but they are not interchangeable.

Effective institutions can help protect the population and sustain economic life. A government that ignores welfare may weaken the productive and social foundations of its authority. Yet a state may also become effective at maintaining control while imposing serious harms. Likewise, a policy described as beneficial may still require scrutiny if its gains are distributed unfairly or if it relies on disproportionate coercion. The three-part framework prevents one dimension from being used as automatic proof of the others.

The strengths of Kautilya's political reasoning include its attention to institutional capacity, the material conditions of government, practical judgment, and the relationship between the ruler's interests and the welfare of subjects. These features make the Arthashastra an important source for comparative political philosophy. Its limitations are equally important: its monarchical and hierarchical assumptions differ from modern democratic standards, while its treatment of coercion and political manipulation raises questions about the limits of state power (Kautilya; Kangle; Olivelle). (Kautilya 1.19.34, 2.1, 2.24).

The article's proposed expression, 'institutionally grounded political realism,' names this combination of practical statecraft and attention to the conditions that sustain government. It should be understood as an interpretive framework, not as a claim that Kautilya coined the phrase or developed a modern welfare-state theory. Its value lies in distinguishing the practical effectiveness of political action from the welfare consequences and normative legitimacy of that action.

The framework also guards against idealising ancient Indian thought. The presence of administrative regulation does not establish the existence of a modern bureaucracy in every relevant sense; attention to welfare does not establish a modern welfare state; and strategic reasoning does not automatically amount to a complete theory of realism. Similarities with modern ideas must be argued, not presumed. At the same time, historical distance does not make the text irrelevant. It can still illuminate enduring questions about power, responsibility, institutional capacity, and the purposes of government.

9. Contemporary Relevance and Limitations

Kautilya's account of administration can contribute to contemporary discussions of institutional accountability. The text's concern with officials, resources, and misconduct highlights a general problem: public purposes may be defeated by poor administration or corruption. Contemporary accountability, however, depends on constitutional law, independent oversight, public scrutiny, and legal protections that cannot simply be equated with mechanisms available in a monarchical setting (Kautilya; Olivelle). (Kautilya 2.8–2.9).

The relationship between productive activity and political stability is also relevant to modern debates about fiscal policy and public welfare. Governments must balance revenue collection, economic incentives, public expenditure, and the distribution of social benefits. The Arthashastra encourages attention to the material foundations of state capacity, but modern policy must be evaluated using contemporary evidence and democratic standards rather than ancient prescriptions alone (Kautilya; Poddar). (Kautilya 2.1, 2.16, 2.24; Poddar).

Security provides a third point of relevance. Governments must respond to threats, but security objectives can conflict with privacy, autonomy, and safeguards against arbitrary authority. The existence of a threat does not automatically justify every response. Necessity, proportionality, legality, and the distribution of risks remain important normative questions. Kautilya's strategic orientation helps illuminate the pressures facing rulers, while contemporary political philosophy supplies additional standards for evaluating state action.

The study of Kautilya also broadens the intellectual geography of political theory. Political philosophy should not be written as if general concepts emerge only from European traditions while other traditions provide merely local examples. Yet intellectual pluralism requires

critical engagement, not unqualified praise. Kautilya's arguments should be read carefully, compared fairly, and evaluated in their historical context. (Dar; Poddar; Strand).

10. CONCLUSION

Kautilya's Arthashastra presents a complex account of political authority connecting statecraft, administration, economic management, security, and the responsibilities of the ruler. Although its attention to strategy and power supports a realist interpretation, realism alone does not fully explain its concern with administrative organisation and the welfare-related conditions of political stability (Kautilya; Kangle; Olivelle). (Kautilya 1.19.34, 2.1, 2.24; Boesche).

This article has argued that the text can be interpreted through the framework of institutionally grounded political realism. The framework connects political effectiveness with the material and administrative conditions that sustain government, while preserving a distinction between effectiveness, welfare, and legitimacy. The ruler's interests are linked to the condition of the subjects, but that relationship does not establish that every measure taken in the name of state stability is ethically justified.

The comparison with Machiavelli demonstrates the value of examining shared political problems without treating distinct traditions as identical. The article's contribution is not the claim that the relationship between Kautilya, ethics, and welfare has never been studied. Rather, it offers an explicit three-part framework for assessing political action and clarifies why state capacity, public benefit, and normative legitimacy must be considered separately.

Further research should examine the relevant passages of the Arthashastra in greater detail, investigate the historical development of its concepts, and compare its account of political authority with other traditions of classical Indian thought. The text's continuing value lies not in supplying a ready-made model for contemporary government but in providing a historically significant resource for thinking critically about power, prudence, welfare, and the justification of political authority.

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