



Social Thought in Kautilya's Arthashastra: A Historical Introspectio

Dr. Nilanjan Chaki

*Head & Assistant Professor, Department of History, Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya,
Bankura, West Bengal, India*

Received: 16.05.2026; Accepted: 19.05.2026; Available online: 31.05.2026

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Abstract

Kautilya wrote Artha Satra in 4th century BC, is the most important text in Indian history. His book covered every aspect of society, administration and statecraft. Accordingly, to him, the ultimate goal of everyone is the attainment of Dharma. He provides knowledge to concepts like state and statecraft. It is the set of ideas which is relevant in today's world. His advice was targeted on the glory, prosperity and security of the state. The objective was to consolidate and empower the state while weakening the opposition. The transition from underdevelopment to development is a great one depending on six-fold foreign policy. His strategy of balance of power depends on environment and conducive political strategy. It also applied practical solution to foreign policy. He also gave a plan to the ruler for achieving their god.

Keywords: Varna, Samskara, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, Trivarga Dharma, Mleccha, Stridhana, Kashya Pana

Introduction:

Human beings face many complicated social problems. Because of this, our thinking often gets confused. The history of social thought, that is, how people think about society, goes back to the beginning of human life on earth. Social thought is usually born during times of crisis. When people are happy and things are going well, new ideas about society are not needed much. But when there is great injustice, war, or rapid change, people start thinking deeply about how society should be organized. New social ideas are usually developed by scholars and thinkers who are somewhat outside the chaos of everyday life. So, we can say that social thought comes from both social crises and careful scholarly thinking.

India has a very long and rich tradition of social thought, even longer than Egypt or Babylon. Indian thought was largely built on the idea of rejecting or moving away from the material world.¹ But it still had very real and practical social ideas. Indian thought does not only concern human beings, it extends to all living beings. Among the early Vedic people, the act of sacrifice had an important social meaning. It was a way of connecting the worshipper with God, and it was believed that this connection could lift a person out of the troubles of life.² Life seemed very harsh to these early people, so they looked for relief through religion.

The Brahman Class and Sacred Knowledge:

When the Aryan people settled near the Ganges plains, they developed a strong class of sacred people called the Brahmanas. Their thinking developed through several important stages. Vedic rituals and ceremonies gave a fixed shape to the teachings of the Brahman.³ The idea of genuine social responsibility has always been slow to develop in human life. All thinking about human beings and society still remains relevant today. In India, this kind of knowledge was organized in a special form, a self-aware body of knowledge that is doubly important. The Indian tradition of writing commentaries and sub-commentaries on original texts encouraged people to think within existing ideas rather than question them. This is a limited view of traditional literature.⁴ Knowledge was often presented in a way that left no room for questioning or criticism.

However, the tradition of debate, starting a position and then arguing against it, did allow for change and new thinking over time.⁵ Even though different schools of thought argued with each other, they all shared common questions about human beings and society.

The Arthashastra of Kautilya deals with ancient Indian social thought. It discusses the values of a classified or organized society, and is one of the most important sources for understanding social thought in ancient India.

The Four Varnas- the Class System:

Kautilya's society was divided into four main groups called Varnas: the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. But the life of an individual was also divided into four stages called Ashrama:

1. Brahmacharya: school life, spent learning under a teacher
2. Garhastha: household life, as the head of a family
3. Vanaprastha: retirement, withdrawing from active life
4. Sanyasa: complete solitary living, the final stage of renunciation

According to Kautilya, a person could not begin searching for universal truth until he had first fulfilled his duties in the world.⁶ The *Arthashastra* says that strictly following the duties of one's Varna and Ashrama "leads to heaven and endless bliss". If people mixed their duties, they would suffer. Kautilya said it was the state's job to protect the social order based on the *Varna* and *Ashrama* system.⁷

The Brahmanas were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, perform religious sacrifices, and practice astrology and other sacred arts.⁸ Kautilya said Brahmanas should not be taxed. They enjoyed many legal privileges, received gifts, and had great influence over the government.

The Kshatriyas were warrior and ruling class. They were supposed to study the Vedas, protect the people, and sacrifice their lives for the state. They held real power and were ranked second after the Brahmanas.

The Vaishyas were farmers and traders. They were the largest group and were supposed to create wealth, especially food grains.⁹ Kautilya said they should be given special favours and support because they were the taxpayers of the Mauryan period.

The Shudras were supposed to serve the other three classes. They assisted Vaishyas in farming, and served as herdsmen or traders' servants. Practising arts and crafts was their exclusive domain.

The Shudras- A Revolutionary Step

The Shudras were the lowest in the social ladder. Kautilya forbade the sale of a Shudra child into slavery. He was the first Brahman thinker to say that Shudras should be part of the Aryan army.¹⁰ He challenged the old Vedic idea of Brahmana-Kshatriya superiority and questioned the idea of the Brahman as a "super-human being".

Kautilya believed that including Shudras among Aryans was the first revolutionary attempt to bring the masses into the mainstream of Aryan society.

Moral and Spiritual Development

Kautilya emphasized the moral and spiritual growth of the people. He taught the importance of Trivarga-dharma, which means:

- **Dharma**— doing one's religious and moral duty; being righteous, humble, kind, and sympathetic
- **Artha**— gaining wealth, property, and power; promoting trade
- **Kama**— the fulfillment of desire, pleasure, and enjoyment

Together, Dharma, Artha, and Kama were called *Trivarga*. The highest aim was Moksha, that is, eternal truth and liberation.¹¹ The Arthashastra says that by preserving social order through these moral values, a person can achieve their highest good.

Mixed Communities and Caste:

The four Varna system was broadly true in ancient Indian society, but there were many communities that did not fit neatly into it. Kautilya tried to bring them into the system through the idea of "mixed Varna".

For example, the son of a Brahmana man and Kshatriya woman belonged to the Brahmana Varna. The son of a Vaishya man and a Shudra woman, however, remained a Shudra. These mixed breedings created new communities in ancient Indian society.¹²

The *Arthashastra* also mentions different professional communities by name, such as *Tantuvayas* (weavers), *Rajaka* (washermen), *Tannaya* (tailors), *Suvarnakar* (goldsmiths), *Carvakara* (leather workers), *Karmara* (smiths), and *Kunaka* (carpenters). These names show that caste was connected to profession and birth.

The Chandala community were outcasts, possibly untouchables. Kautilya said a heavy fine should be charged if a Chandala touched an Aryan woman. The idea of untouchability seems to have developed in Mauryan society as a result of such social rules.

Interestingly, the *Arthashastra* also said that every community should follow its own customs and laws of inheritance.¹³ The word used for community is *jati*, which means membership by birth. This is clearly the origin of the caste system as we know it.

The social conditions described in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* are not very different from what exists today. The same four *Varna* theory exists, with many castes of different origins. The pattern of social grouping was more or less fixed by the time the *Arthashastra* was written. What happened later was simply more castes and sub-castes being created.

Education:

The Arthashastra gave great importance to education. It made it compulsory for the three upper Varnas- Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, to learn by studying the Vedas. Every male child from these groups had to begin his education through a formal ceremony.

Kautilya said that the main goal of education is self-control: controlling ones senses and desires. A good student was supposed to observe celibacy, sleep on bare ground, wear matted hair, worship the sacred fire, and live on forest produce.¹⁴

According to Kautilya, the necessary conditions for getting a good education were:

- Discipline
- Desire to learn
- Cultivating truth
- Grasping what is taught
- Retaining what is grasped
- Knowledge of proper means and careful thinking

Kautilya wanted people to be well-educated so they could lead society towards progress. The individual is an important part of society, and through the individual, the social goal can be achieved.¹⁵ It is important to note, however, that female children and Shudras were denied the right to education even in Mauryan times.

Kautilya's Views on Leaving Family Life:

Kautilya did not approve of people abandoning their household duties to become monks or nuns too early. He considered it harmful to both the family and to society. He said no one should become a religious ascetic without first providing for their dependents, such as minor sons, unmarried daughters or widows.¹⁶ Anyone who forced a woman with child-bearing capacity into convent was punished.

Marriage:

Kautilya considered marriage one of the most important institutions. He accepted both marriage within the same caste and marriages between different castes. However, children from mixed-caste marriages were placed low in the social hierarchy.

To prevent unhappy marriages, the father of a newly married girl was fined 96 *panas* if the girl's physical defects were not disclosed before the wedding. Similarly, a matchmaker who arranged a marriage without revealing the groom's defects was fined double, 192 *panas*, and the dowry and *Stridhana* (woman's property) were taken away.

Kautilya said a marriage could be cancelled any time before the final ceremony of *panigrahan* (taking the bride's hand in marriage), but not after the birth of a child.¹⁷ He also recognised the biological needs of young wives. If a husband had been away for a long time, left no child, and made no financial provision, the wife was allowed to remarry. Even having a relationship with another man and having a child by him during the husband's long absence was permitted.

Kautilya emphasized that the relationship between husband and wife should be equal and reciprocal.¹⁸ He forbade cruelty between spouses. He allowed women to remarry in certain circumstances: for example, if a woman's dowry was not provided, if her husband had been abroad for a long time, or if her husband suffered from a serious disease or was sterile.

If the wife wanted a divorce against her husband's wishes, she had to give back everything he had given to her. If the husband wanted a divorce against her wishes, he had to return everything he had taken from her.¹⁹ If the divorce was mutual, or there was no agreement, then either party could end the marriage, although at some financial cost.

Widows and Remarriage:

Remarkably, Kautilya's Arthashastra deals with the question of widow remarriage. Widows were allowed to remarry with or without the consent of their in-laws, under certain conditions.²⁰ The choice of remarriage or of leading a pious wife was the woman's own.

If a widow chose to remarry, she had to give back everything that her father-in-law or her late husband had given her. If a widow had no children and did not remarry, she could keep all her property till the end of her life.

Polygamy:

Kautilya mentions that *Brahmanas*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras* could have many wives, even from different *Varnas*. This shows that polygamy had become common among Aryans. A husband could marry another woman if he could support them financially, or if his current wife did not give birth to a son, or only had daughters.²¹ This reflects the idea that a wife's most important role was to produce children, especially sons.

Women's Freedom of Movement:

Women from the upper *Varnas* had no freedom of movement. They could only go to a neighbour's house or to a village headman in case of ill-treatment or insult.²² On occasions like death, illness, disaster, or childbirth, they could visit their relatives. Otherwise, they could not go anywhere without their husband's permission.

These restrictions existed because society was anxious to ensure the complete loyalty of a wife to her husband. Women were kept under their husband's control and even lived in separate, secluded apartments. Asoka himself is said to have maintained separate apartments for women. However, women of lower classes and castes had more freedom in comparison.

Women- A Summary View:

Scholars and historians agree that the Mauryan period was not a golden age for women.²³ But the Arthashastra does contain laws dealing with marriage, divorce, inheritance, cruelty, rape, and molestation. Kautilya was both a statesman and a humanist. He can be seen as a liberal thinker because he allowed widow remarriage and tried to protect women's rights.

Prostitution:

Kautilya was the first Indian thinker to propose legalising and regulating prostitution. The state earned a large share of money from this. The fees of prostitutes were fixed by law. Even women from higher families-maintained brothels under government supervision and paid taxes on their earnings.²⁴ This gave the state extra revenue.

These prostitutes, called *ganikas*, were well-trained in fine arts and the art of conversation. Besides *ganikas*, there were also *rupajivas* – beautiful young women who lived by selling their youth and beauty.²⁵ They were licensed, medically examined and treated, and charged double the normal fee as tax every month.

The Joint Family System:

Kautilya praised the joint family system as the best way to provide social security to old and disabled family members. The male head of the family was fined if he neglected his responsibilities. Any person who took up a religious life without providing financially for his family members was punished.²⁶ Kautilya said it was the duty of the head of the family

to maintain his children, wife, parents, minor brothers, and unmarried and widowed sisters.

Religion:

The Arthashastra describes a religious life that was quite different from that prescribed in the Vedic tradition. It mentions many references to temples, images of gods, and worship practices.²⁷ These included the Caitya deity in a temple, the image of a deity (devapratima), the flag of a deity, gifts to a deities, and incense offerings. Kautilya also referred to the local deity of a region (desa devata), the city deity (nagar devata), and the family deity of the king (*rajadevata*).

The worshipping of images with flowers, incense, and gifts in temples seems to have been a non-Aryan practice. It appears that people simply continued the religious beliefs they were already used to. The non-Aryan people had ignored the Aryan religious practices, and the image-worship tradition seems to go as far back as the Harappan civilization.²⁸ This is why Kautilya paid attention to the religious life of all classes and castes, while the Dharmashastra traditions focused mainly on the Aryan way of life.

Slavery:

Information about slavery in the Mauryan period mainly comes from the Arthashastra of Kautilya. Kautilya deals with the social, political, and economic problems of slavery in detail. He even devoted a whole chapter to it.²⁹ Slavery was the most common form of social inequality in Mauryan times.

Kautilya put slaves into nine categories:

1. Slaves made for basic survival (subsistence)
2. Self-sold slaves
3. Slaves captured in war
4. Slaves acquired by purchase
5. Born slaves (born into slavery)
6. Slaves as a form of punishment
7. Slaves obtained through inheritance
8. Slaves received as gifts
9. Slaves given as a pledge

Kautilya warned that no Arya person, including Shudras, could be enslaved under any circumstances. However, Mlecchas (non-Aryan people) could be enslaved by their own relatives or by society using the Aryan fourfold formula.³⁰ Still, there was no better Dharma than protecting one's own life, and so if there was no other way to survive, even an Arya – including a minor – could become a slave for maintenance.

The Arya family, in times of distress, could accept the support of a more fortunate Arya. Once the ransom was collected, the helper had to be repaid.³¹ Kautilya supported the institution of slavery as a necessary part of society, but he gave slaves certain rights to help them achieve freedom. His goal was to reduce the cruelty and harshness of the traditional system.

Kautilya said:

"For one selling or keeping as a pledge a minor Aryan individual except a slave for livelihood, the fine is twelve panas for a kinsman in the case of a Shudra, double in

the case of a Vaishya, three times in the case of a Kshatriya, four times in the case of a Brahman."³²

If someone other than a kinsman did the same, they were punished with the three amercements (fines) and even death. Purchasers and witnesses were also punished.

The main rule of Kautilyan social thought was: an Arya cannot be subjected to slavery. This does not mean he was completely traditional thinker, in fact, he included Shudras in the Aryan society and had very liberal ideas for them.³³ Even a member of the highest *Varna* could be made a slave, though their slavery was not lifelong.

Kautilya said that slavery was limited to *Mlecchas*. A *Mlechha* could never be freed and was bound for life, while an Arya could gain freedom by paying half the price or by doing work. The reason given for this was that *Mlecchas* were considered "savage and backward."

Even though Kautilya accepted slavery as a part of society, he strongly argued for humane treatment of slaves.³⁴ He said that employing a slave to carry dead bodies or sweep waste, keeping a slave naked, making a woman give a bath to a naked person, hurting or abusing a slave, or violating the honour of a female slaves were all serious offences.

Slaves who were nurses, female cooks, or female servants who were sexually exploited earned their freedom.³⁵ If a master had relations with a female slave against her will, he was punished with a fine. Causing abortion to a pregnant female slave, or pledging a pregnant female slave without providing nourishment, were punishable offences.³⁶ Masters who did not free Arya slaves even after ransom was paid were fined.

The *Arthashastra* tells us that a female slave who lived by her beauty (*rupadasi* or *rupajiva*), if killed by anyone, the killer had to pay the highest fine. For the first time in ancient Indian history, Kautilya gave slaves the right to property:

*"A slave shall be entitled to enjoy not only whatever he has earned without prejudice to his master's work but also the inheritance he has received from his father."*³⁷

Kautilya believed the practice of slavery was an evil, but that it could be reformed if handled carefully. It was the moral duty of the state to protect the honour of those who were forced by circumstances to enslave themselves.

Conclusion:

From the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, we can understand that he recognized the value of slave labour, which was cheaper than paying wages. Slaves were used in farming on state lands, in mines, and in factories.³⁸ Kautilya gave slaves certain ways to regain their freedom and placed restrictions on what masters could do to them. During their period of bondage, their social conditions were made as humane and honourable as possible.

Overall, the *Shudras* were seen as part of Aryan society. It was Kautilya's first revolutionary step to bring them into the Aryan fold, rejecting the unbearable norms of *Brahmanical* traditions.³⁹ The *Arthashastra* emphasized the moral and spiritual growth of the people by explaining the importance of *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*.⁴⁰ His view of the relationship between husband and wife was one of mutual respect. He forbade cruelty, allowed monogamy, showed compassion towards widows, and was not in favour of people withdrawing from the world. He made laws for the welfare of society, banned the

sale of minor children as slaves, protected the rights and honour of female slaves, and gave civil rights to *Shudras* that had not been recognized before.

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