



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

PRE – KAUTILYA ARTHAŚĀSTRA DISCOURSES

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Abstract: This paper investigates the evolution of Arthaśāstra discourse before Kautilya, challenging the perception that the tradition began solely with his treatise. While Kautilya's Arthaśāstra stands as the most comprehensive extant work on statecraft, economy, and governance, its roots lie in earlier intellectual traditions. The study traces the origin of Arthaśāstra to Vedic texts, where early concepts of polity, economics, and governance were structured within the Trivarga framework—Dharma, Artha, and Kāma. The Mahabharata also presents an alternative origin, attributing the first Dandanīti to Brahma, which scholars like Śankara, Indra, Bṛhaspati, and Uśanas later abridged. The paper highlights the contributions of pre-Kautilyan scholars such as Śukra and Bṛhaspati, whose works, Śukranītisāra and Bṛhaspatisūtra, significantly influenced Kautilya's synthesis. It further explores the debates surrounding the chronology of these texts, emphasizing how ancient socio-political realities shaped their ideologies. While Śukranītisāra reflects a blend of political ethics and economic principles, Bṛhaspatisūtra focuses on Dandanīti and governance strategies. Ultimately, the study concludes that Arthaśāstra is not a singular creation but the culmination of centuries of intellectual discourse rooted in Indian knowledge systems. It argues for further critical examination of ancient texts to clarify the contributions and timelines of early scholars, reinforcing the understanding that the Arthaśāstra tradition is both ancient and dynamic, continuously evolving alongside societal needs and historical contexts.

Index Terms – Pre-Kautilyan, Arthaśāstra, Kautilya, Bṛhaspatisūtra, Śukranītisāra

I. INTRODUCTION

Arthaśāstra just like every other traditional knowledge system has a vast theoretical framework. However, the studies regarding the Arthaśāstra tradition seem to be roaming around Kautilya's Arthaśāstra, as it is the earliest and extensive treatise among those available today. The three aims of life i.e., the Trivargas¹ systemized an individual's life into Dharma, Artha and Kama. Kangle states, "Since very early times, Artha has been regarded as one of the trivarga or three goals of human existence, the other two being Dharma and Kama. In this connection, Artha is understood to stand for material well-being as well as the means of securing such well-being, particularly wealth. Like the two other goals, Artha also has primarily the individual view. It is the individual who is to pursue Artha as one of the goals of his life. Now, an essential condition of a man's material well-being is the security of livelihood" (Kangle R. P., 2010: 1). All these three elements advocate individuals to set up a life according to the principles embedded in them. According to Kautilya the most important among them was Artha, as the other two are rooted in Artha².

The scholarly tradition of Arthaśāstra can be seen developed after Kautilya to a great extent. Texts like Śukranītisāra, Bṛhaspati Sutra, Kamandakīya Nītisāra, Rajanīti Ratnakara, Nītivakyamṛta, Viramitrodaya, Nītimayukha, Yuktikalpataru etc., kept the scholarly endurance of Artha tradition lively. However, the pre-Kautilya Artha tradition deserves an analysis regarding its origin and its early development. This paper is an attempt of retrospection through the aforementioned stages of Arthaśāstra discourses.

Need and objectives of the study

The need for this study arises from the detailed understanding of the evolution of Arthasastra traditions. While the Vedas, Mahabharata, and other ancient texts offer glimpses into early Arthasastra thought, the lack of cohesive analysis has left significant gaps in tracing how these early discourses shaped the later, more refined works like Kautilya's Arthasastra. Furthermore, the contested chronology of the Bṛhaspati Sutra and Sukranitisara underscores the necessity for an objective examination to clarify their historical positioning and contributions to Arthasastra thought. This study aims to connect these gaps by exploring the origins, evolution, and conceptual frameworks of pre-Kautilyan Arthasastra discourses. By doing so, it will not only provide a more holistic understanding of the Arthasastra tradition but also highlight the intellectual continuity and transformations within ancient Indian political and economic thought. Such an exploration is crucial for appreciating the depth and diversity of traditional Indian knowledge systems and for situating Kautilya's work within a broader historical and philosophical context.

¹ Also known as Trivargas

² Arthaś, 1.7.6,7.

Origin of Arthaśāstra thoughts

As stated earlier, the Arthaśāstra tradition was so prevalent even before the period of Kautilya. Even Kautilya himself had mentioned the earliest scholars in this particular area. Apart from these mentions, he thoroughly analyzed, criticized, and redefined the theories asserted by the previous scholars of this tradition. Here, it requires a retrospection towards the early conceptual terrains of this scholarly tradition. And that is none other than the Vedas. Most of the scholars among this tradition always considered Vedas as science or vidya³. So Vedas can be said to be the foundational structure of Arthaśāstra, just like every other traditional knowledge systems of India.

A more contradicting description about the origin of Arthaśāstra can be seen in Mahabharata. According to Mahabharata the very first Dandanīti was written by Brahma and it was so bulky in content. Later, in course of time, Sankara or Siva, Indra, Brhaspati, Ousana etc had to reduced the size of this work so that the common people could persive it. "The treatise, it is said, contained one hundred thousand chapters and dealt with the Trivarga of dharma, artha and kāma. It is added that the four lores of Trayi, Ānvikshiki, Vārttā and Dandanīti were also treated in that work. Then follows a detailed analysis of its contents. This list of contents, however, makes no mention at all of topics connected with Trayi, Ānvikshiki and Vārttā, but refers only to topics that are germane to Dandanīti. According to the Mahabharata legend this work of Brahma was abridged by Śankara Viśālāksha (in abridged form it was called Vaiśālāksha) into ten thousand chapters, which in turn was reduced to 5000 chapters by Indra (whose work was called Bāhudantaka) Indra's work was further compressed to 3000 Adhyayas by Brhaspati which in turn was abridged into 1000 Adhyāyas by Kavya (Uśanas or Śukra) (Goyal S.R., 2000: 4).

Coming back to Vedas, they had provided many descriptions regarding Arthaśāstra, such as polity, economics etc. A classification of government can be seen in Vedas. The theocratic, democratic and monarchial. The theocratic form of government was a societal structure existed even before the formation of the so-called political institutions or can be simply called as the rule of Rta or the cosmic order. In this form of self-administration, the Nature and universe functioned within the terms of Rta. It was more of an ideal society in which all the creatures protected each other taking it as their duty. Here, the level of requirement of a king or ruler is zero. Because the welfare and protection of an individual was considered as the duty of fellow beings. So there was neither existed state not kingship, neither punishable nor the punisher (Radhav Allabh Tripathi, Chaube B.B., 1997: 41).

Eventually, the theocratic form had to set back as the society was filled with injustices when the powerful ones suppressed the weaker one. According to Kautilya, such problems arises with the lack of enough Dandanīti (find footnote). Here a king or a ruler will become inevitable in the society to protect the weaker section and to impose dandanīti righteously. Atharvaveda, clearly refer to the existence of democratic form of government in the Vedic age. The head of the government was called Rajan. But he did not ascent the throne by the virtue of his hereditary right. He was elected by the people. There are ample references to the system stem of electing a king in the Vedic texts (Radhav Allabh Tripathi, Chaube B.B., 1997: 42). Aitareya brahmana also refers a similar context in which the demons became a threat to god's in the absence of a King⁴. Monarchial form of administration can also be seen in the Vedic literature. Terminologies like Samrāj, Ekarāja, and Adhirāj found in Rgveda and other samhitas unveils the existence of a king who was considered to be superior and monocrat.

These descriptions can be considered as the earliest discussions regarding Arthaśāstra discourses. But it is impossible to amalgamate these scattered ideas in to the theoretical framework of a scholarly tradition. It more time for specific studies to be made on this subject. It is not clear who was the first to conduct such a study. However from Kautilya's references there are clues about those who did such studies in the early periods. References like "neti Kautilya" in some parts of Arthaśāstra helps to understand that they are the observations of those who had been engaged in ancient times. Kautilya referred the views of Mānavas, Bārhaspatyas, Auśanas, Bhāradvāja, Viśālāksha, Parāsāra, Piśuna, Kauṇapadanta, Vātavyādhi, Bāhudantaputra, Āmbhīyāh etc. From these references it cannot be asserted that all of them presented their views in the form of works. However, no such works have yet been founded. But the authorship of works like Brhaspatisutra and Śukranītisāra seems often attributed to the early scholars Śukra or Auśanasa and Brhaspati.

Problematization of the Chronology of Brhaspatisutra and Śukranītisāra

Kautilya salutes Śukra and Brhaspati at the beginning of Arthasatra⁵. Śukra was also known as Usana and the school he founded became known as Auśanasa. Given that he initially cited Śukra's name, even though chronologically Brhaspati came first, it can be assumed that Kautilya may be an adherent of Auśanasa tradition. Śukra is believed to be the author of Śukranīti or Śukranītisāra. The majority of Śukranītisāra's contents are focused on polity and statecraft. Śukranītisāra is quite short, consisting of only four chapters, in comparison to Arthaśāstra of Kautilya. Political ethics and the science of government are covered in great detail in these four chapters. These political ethics are observed to be mixed with economic ideologies. However Śukra and his work were considered as much significant in the area of polity and statecraft. Throughout Indian literature, Śukra is always upheld as one of the greatest sages, his sayings are carefully noted and quotations from his essence of polity or Nītisāra are met with in the most ancient and celebrated writings (Oppert, 1880:34).

Regarding the chronology of this text, a debate can be seen going on among the scholars. A group of scholars argued that Śukranītisāra was written in the vedic period. As mentioned earlier, Mahabharata has a reference about Śukra and his work. This argument places Śukranīti to ancient times. The next theory attributes this text to modern period. As the text discussed guns and gun powders, a set of scholars stand against the idea of its origin in the vedic era. So it must be written after 10th century C.E. Anyhow, the statement of Kautilya regarding Usanas underlines its pre-Kautilyan origin. A rational assumption can be made in the light of these theories that, perhaps there existed a Śukranīti and the present one might be a revised edition made by a scholar who followed the Śukra tradition.

Just like Śukra, Brhaspati was also a prominent ancient Arthaśāstra scholar of the pre-Kautilyan period. The Bārhaspatya tradition is one of the schools Kautilya mentioned in Arthaśāstra. Brhaspati's adherents were referred to as Bārhaspatyas. Pancatantra of Visnu Sarma also mentioned about a nītisāstra of Brhaspati⁶. F.W. Thomas published a manuscript of Brhaspatisutra

³ Arthaś, 1.2.1,2

⁴ Ait. Br., 1.3.3.

⁵ Arthasāstra, 1.1.1

⁶ Pancatantra, 2. 47.

consisting of 6 chapters in 1816. This written text was in Roman script and Bhagavad Datta published the same text in Davanāgiri in 1821. Similar to Śukranīti, scholars have different opinions regarding the period of this work. According to Kane, it's a later text and it doesn't deserve that much importance⁷. But Dr. K.P. Jayaswal placed this text in a pre-Kautilyan timeline⁸. But the now available text must not be the one that Kautilya mentioned in Arthaśāstra. According to Kautilya's Arthaśāstra, the Bṛhaspati tradition accepts two sciences, the varṭta and the Dandanīti. But in the now available text, it seems the author has agreed only one science and that is Dandanīti⁹. So this might be authored by someone other than the Bṛhaspati whom Kautilya acknowledges as the founder of the Bārhaspatya tradition.

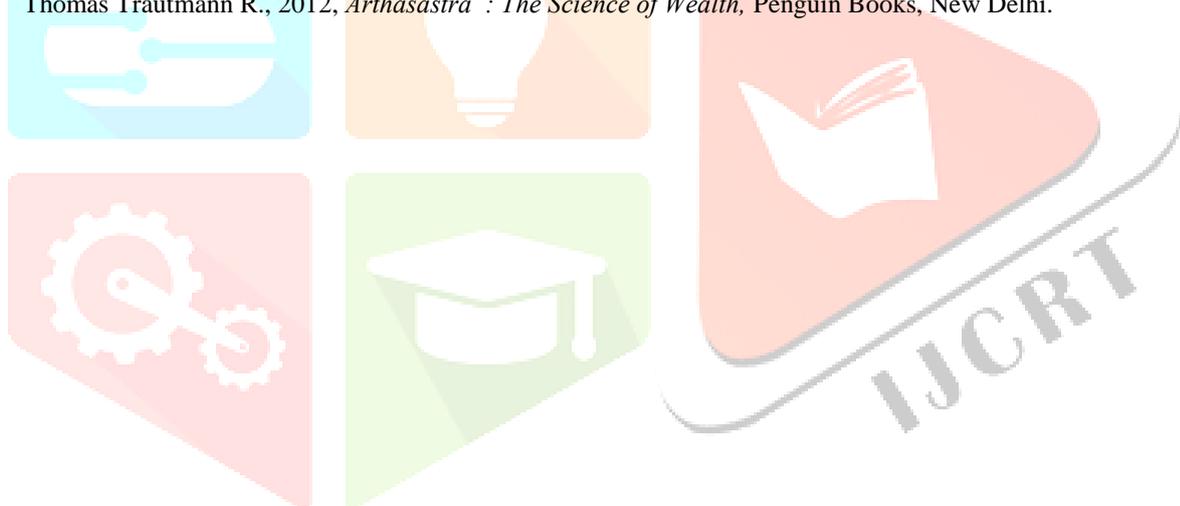
CONCLUSION

The origin and development of the Arthaśāstra tradition reveal a rich and complex intellectual tradition that goes beyond the period of Kautilya. Both textual evidence and historical references indicate that the Arthaśāstra was not a singular creation but rather the inferences of centuries of scholarship rooted in the Vedic knowledge systems. The Vedas, with their descriptions of polity, economics, and governance, provided the foundational framework for the Arthaśāstra tradition, while the Mahabharata offered a more mythological yet structured account of its evolution.

Ultimately, the Arthaśāstra tradition appears to be an evolving stream of knowledge shaped by multiple scholars and schools over time. While Kautilya's work stands as the most comprehensive and systematic treatise, it is evident that his ideas were built upon a longstanding intellectual tradition. Further research and critical examination of ancient texts are necessary to clarify the exact contributions and timelines of these early scholars, strengthening the idea that the Arthaśāstra tradition is both ancient and active, continuously adapting to the needs and realities of its time.

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⁷ Kane P.V., *History of Dharma Shastra*, P. 126.

⁸ Kashi Prasad Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, P. 7.

⁹ Bṛhaspati sutra 1.3.