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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Ancient Indian Political Philosophies on International Modern Political Theories (with Special Reference to *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata*)

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: This paper explores the influence of ancient Indian political philosophies on modern international political theories, focusing on key texts like the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata*.
Methods: This study analyzes the foundational concepts of governance, statecraft, diplomacy, and ethics in ancient Indian thought and traces their reverberations in contemporary political discourse by examining both historical contexts and theoretical frameworks.
Results: The analysis highlights the relevance and application of these ancient principles in modern international relations.
Conclusion: This study contributes to a deeper understanding of global political dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Mahabharata; *Arthashastra*; Kautilya; International Relations; Political Philosophies

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of political philosophy has long been central to understanding the evolution of governance, diplomacy, and international relations. While modern political theories are often associated with Western intellectual traditions, ancient Indian political thought also presents a sophisticated and influential body of ideas that contributed significantly to concepts of statecraft, power, ethics, and interstate relations (Prakash, 2010). Classical Indian texts such as the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (Chanakya) and the *Mahabharata* embody profound political insights that continue to resonate within contemporary international political theories (Boesche, 2002; Prakash, 2010). These works not only reflect the socio-political realities of ancient India but also provide enduring principles relevant to modern governance and global diplomacy.

The *Arthashastra*, composed around the 4th century BCE, is widely regarded as one of the earliest systematic treatises on political science, administration, and international relations (Kangle, 1965; Thapar, 2002). Attributed to Kautilya, the chief advisor to Chandragupta Maurya, the text offers a pragmatic and strategic approach to governance (Chaturvedi, 2006; Mahajan, 2000). It discusses subjects such as state administration, economic management, intelligence systems, diplomacy, warfare, and foreign policy. The *Mandala Theory* of interstate relations, which explains alliances and rivalries among neighboring states, bears remarkable similarity to modern realist theories in international politics (Boesche, 2002). Kautilya's emphasis on national interest, balance of power, and strategic diplomacy demonstrates an advanced understanding of political realism centuries before similar concepts emerged in Western political thought. Consequently, the *Arthashastra* is often compared with's *The Prince* due to its practical and realistic approach to political authority and statecraft (Boesche, 2002).

Similarly, the *Mahabharata*, one of the greatest Indian epics, presents a broader philosophical and ethical dimension of politics and governance. Through its complex narratives, dialogues, and characters, the text explores themes such as *dharma* (duty and righteousness), justice, morality, leadership, and the ethical dilemmas faced by rulers. The political discourses found in sections such as the *Shanti Parva* and *Vidura Niti* provide detailed reflections on kingship, diplomacy, war ethics, and public administration (Singh, 2005). Unlike purely pragmatic political models, the *Mahabharata* integrates morality with political action, emphasizing that governance must ultimately serve justice and social harmony (Das, 2009). These ideas continue to influence debates in modern international political theory concerning ethical leadership, humanitarian values, and just war principles.

The significance of studying ancient Indian political philosophies lies in their continuing relevance to contemporary international relations and political discourse. In an era characterized by global conflicts, strategic competition, and ethical challenges in governance, revisiting these classical traditions offers alternative perspectives on diplomacy, conflict resolution, and state behavior. Ancient Indian thinkers recognized the complexity of human nature and political power, balancing realism with ethical considerations. Their insights contribute to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of political theory beyond Eurocentric frameworks (Ling, 2023).

Recent scholarship in International Relations has increasingly emphasized the importance of incorporating non-Western intellectual traditions into mainstream theoretical debates (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Tickner & Blaney, 2012). Contemporary research argues that a more pluralistic discipline requires greater engagement with indigenous political philosophies and civilizational perspectives that have historically remained underrepresented in International Relations scholarship (Acharya, 2023; Shahi, 2022). Within this context, renewed academic interest in Kautilya's strategic thought and the ethical dimensions of the Mahabharata has contributed to

broader discussions on strategic culture, normative international theory, and Global IR, reinforcing the continuing relevance of ancient Indian political philosophy for understanding contemporary global politics.

This research paper seeks to examine the impact of ancient Indian political philosophies on modern international political theories, with special reference to the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata*. The study aims to analyze the key political concepts embedded in these texts, identify their parallels with modern political theories such as realism, idealism, and strategic diplomacy, and evaluate their influence on contemporary international relations. By exploring these ancient intellectual traditions, the paper highlights the enduring relevance of Indian political thought in shaping modern understandings of governance and global political order.

The research adopts a historical-analytical methodology, relying on primary ancient texts, scholarly interpretations, and comparative analysis. Through this approach, the study attempts to trace the continuity of political ideas from ancient Indian philosophy to present-day international political theories. Ultimately, the paper argues that the political wisdom contained in the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata* remains highly significant in understanding both the ethical and strategic dimensions of modern world politics.

2. ANCIENT INDIAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES

Ancient Indian political thought represents one of the oldest and most sophisticated traditions of governance and diplomacy in world history (Prakash, 2010; Thapar, 2002). Long before the emergence of modern European political theories, Indian scholars and philosophers developed systematic ideas about statecraft, power, ethics, diplomacy, war, and international relations. Two of the most influential texts in this tradition are the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (Chanakya) and the *Mahabharata*, particularly its Shanti Parva and Bhagavad Gita. These texts provide a detailed understanding of political organization, moral governance, interstate relations, and leadership. Their ideas continue to influence modern political theory and international relations.

The political philosophies found in these works combine realism with morality, practical governance with ethical responsibility, and strategic thinking with social welfare. Together, they form the foundation of ancient Indian political philosophy and offer significant insights into contemporary international political theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

2.1 The *Arthashastra*: A Treatise on Statecraft and Political Realism

The *Arthashastra*, written by Kautilya around the 4th century BCE during the Mauryan period, is regarded as one of the earliest comprehensive works on political science, economics, military strategy, and administration (Kangle, 1965; Thapar, 2002). Kautilya was the chief advisor to Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Mauryan Empire, which became one of the largest empires in ancient India (Mahajan, 2000; Tripathi, 2004). The text contains approximately 6,000 sutras (verses and statements) divided into 15 books and 180 chapters, dealing with every aspect of governance and statecraft (Kangle, 1965).

Kautilya viewed the state as the supreme institution responsible for maintaining order, security, and prosperity. His political philosophy is often compared with the ideas of Niccol Machiavelli because of its practical and realistic approach to politics (Boesche, 2002). However, unlike Machiavelli, Kautilya also emphasized public welfare and ethical duties of rulers (Boesche, 2002).

One of the most important concepts in the *Arthashastra* is the Saptanga Theory of State, which identifies seven essential elements of a successful state: the king, ministers, territory, fortifications, treasury, army, and allies (Kangle, 1965; Prakash, 2010). According to Kautilya, the strength and stability of a kingdom depend upon the balanced functioning of these seven elements. This theory resembles modern concepts of sovereignty, national power, and state institutions in international relations.

Another major contribution of the *Arthashastra* is its theory of diplomacy known as the Mandala Theory or *Circle of States*. Kautilya argued that neighboring states are natural enemies, while the enemy's enemy is a natural ally (Boesche, 2002; Kangle, 1965). This theory anticipated the balance of power approach later developed in modern realist theories of international politics. It explains how states pursue alliances, strategic partnerships, and military preparedness to secure national interests.

Kautilya also gave significant importance to espionage and intelligence gathering. He developed a highly organized spy system involving secret agents, informers, and undercover operations (Boesche, 2002). According to the *Arthashastra*, intelligence was necessary for maintaining internal stability and understanding the intentions of rival states. Modern intelligence agencies and strategic security policies reflect similar principles.

The text also contains detailed economic policies. Kautilya believed that economic prosperity was the foundation of political stability (Sen, 1999). He advocated efficient taxation, agricultural development, trade regulation, mining, irrigation systems, and state-controlled industries (Kangle, 1965). Historical evidence suggests that the Mauryan Empire maintained one of the most organized administrative and economic systems of the ancient world, generating substantial revenue through taxation and trade (Roy, 2009; Sharma, 2009; Thapar, 2002).

Military organization is another important feature of the *Arthashastra*. Kautilya discussed army formation, war tactics, fortification systems, naval forces, and psychological warfare. He identified different forms of warfare, including open warfare, guerrilla warfare, and silent warfare through espionage and sabotage (Kangle, 1965). These ideas resemble many principles used in modern strategic studies and defense policies.

Although the *Arthashastra* supports pragmatic politics, it does not completely ignore morality. Kautilya stated that "the happiness of the subjects lies in the happiness of the king" (Kangle, 1965). Thus, the ruler's ultimate responsibility was public welfare, justice, and social order. This balance between realism and welfare makes the *Arthashastra* a unique contribution to political philosophy.

2.2 Political and Ethical Philosophy in the *Mahabharata*

The *Mahabharata*, composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE and traditionally attributed to Vyasa, is one of the longest epics in world literature with over 100,000 verses (Thapar, 2002; Winternitz, 1996). Beyond its literary and religious significance, the epic serves as a profound source of political, ethical, and philosophical thought. It presents complex discussions on governance, morality, justice, diplomacy, and leadership through narratives and dialogues.

Central to the *Mahabharata* is the concept of Dharma, which refers to righteousness, duty, justice, and moral order (Das, 2009). Political authority, according to the epic, must be guided by dharma rather than mere ambition or force. Kings and rulers are expected to uphold justice, protect the weak, and maintain social harmony.

The Shanti Parva, one of the most politically significant sections of the epic, contains detailed discussions on kingship, governance, law, and statecraft. Bhishma, while lying on the bed of arrows, advises Yudhishthira on the duties of a ruler (Singh, 2005). He emphasizes that a king should govern with wisdom, compassion, self-control, and fairness. The ruler is viewed not as an autocrat but as a guardian of public welfare.

The *Mahabharata* also explores the dangers of greed, pride, and misuse of power. The conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas demonstrates how political ambition and unethical behavior can lead to destruction and war. Through this narrative, the epic highlights the importance of ethical leadership and peaceful conflict resolution.

Diplomacy plays a significant role in the epic. Before the Kurukshetra War, Krishna repeatedly attempts negotiation and peace-building between the two sides (Srivastava, 2011). His diplomatic mission reflects the preference for peaceful settlement of disputes before resorting to war. This principle resembles modern international norms emphasizing dialogue, mediation, and conflict resolution.

The Bhagavad Gita, a philosophical dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, addresses moral dilemmas in political and military action. Arjuna hesitates to fight against his relatives and teachers, but Krishna explains the importance of duty and righteous action. The text presents a sophisticated understanding of ethics in warfare, responsibility, and leadership (Das, 2009; Zimmer, 1951).

The *Mahabharata* also contains early ideas of just war theory. War is considered legitimate only when all peaceful alternatives fail and

when it is fought for justice and protection of dharma. Rules regarding treatment of prisoners, prohibition of attacking unarmed soldiers, and restrictions on night warfare demonstrate ethical concerns similar to modern humanitarian laws and Geneva Conventions (Singh, 2005).

Unlike the highly pragmatic tone of the *Arthashastra*, the *Mahabharata* emphasizes moral and spiritual dimensions of politics. Nevertheless, both texts recognize the complexity of governance and the necessity of balancing ethics with practical realities.

2.3 Influence on Modern International Political Theories

Modern international political theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism examine how states behave in the international system, how power operates, and how cooperation emerges among nations. The ideas found in ancient Indian political philosophy have remarkable similarities with these modern theories.

The *Arthashastra* strongly resembles realism, one of the dominant theories in international relations. Realist scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz argue that states pursue national interests, power, and security in an anarchic international system. Kautilya's Mandala Theory, with its emphasis on alliances, military preparedness, and intelligence gathering, closely aligns with realist assumptions (Boesche, 2002; Shahi, 2022). His belief that states must act pragmatically to survive reflects the core principles of political realism.

At the same time, the welfare-oriented aspects of the *Arthashastra* and the ethical teachings of the *Mahabharata* correspond with elements of liberalism. Liberal theorists emphasize cooperation, diplomacy, institutions, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Krishna's attempts at negotiation and the emphasis on righteous governance reflect liberal values regarding international cooperation and moral responsibility.

The *Mahabharata* also relates to constructivism, and a modern theory associated with scholars such as Alexander Wendt (1999). Constructivists argue that international politics is shaped not only by material power but also by ideas, norms, identities, and values. The central role of dharma in the *Mahabharata* demonstrates how moral norms and ethical beliefs influence political behavior and decision-making.

Furthermore, ancient Indian philosophies contributed to ideas about strategic autonomy, balance of power, ethical warfare, and state responsibility, which continue to influence India's contemporary foreign policy (Jha, 1997; Yadav, 2000). Modern Indian diplomacy often reflects Kautilya's strategic realism combined with Gandhian moral principles and democratic values (Vanaik, 2006).

2.4 Comparative Significance and Contemporary Relevance

Comparative political studies increasingly recognize that international political theory should not remain limited to Western traditions alone (Acharya & Buzan, 2019). Ancient Indian political philosophy offers alternative frameworks for understanding governance, ethics, diplomacy, and global order (Shahi, 2022; Tickner & Blaney, 2012). While Western realism often separates morality from politics, Indian traditions attempted to integrate practical statecraft with ethical responsibility.

The *Arthashastra* provides a realistic understanding of power politics, intelligence, economic management, and strategic alliances, making it highly relevant in contemporary geopolitical studies. In contrast, the *Mahabharata* emphasizes moral leadership, justice, and ethical governance, which remain essential for sustainable peace and international cooperation.

In the 21st century, issues such as terrorism, nuclear deterrence, economic competition, climate diplomacy, and global governance require both strategic realism and ethical responsibility. Ancient Indian political philosophies therefore offer valuable insights for modern policymakers, scholars, and international relations theorists.

The *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata* together represent the richness and depth of ancient Indian political philosophy. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* developed a sophisticated theory of statecraft based on realism, diplomacy, military strategy, and economic administration, while the *Mahabharata* explored the ethical and moral dimensions of power, leadership, and governance.

These texts significantly anticipated many principles found in modern international political theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Their discussions on diplomacy, balance of power, ethical warfare, state responsibility, and public welfare continue to remain relevant in contemporary international relations.

The study of ancient Indian political thought broadens the scope of global political theory by incorporating non-Western intellectual traditions. It demonstrates that concepts of governance, diplomacy, and international order were deeply developed in ancient India long before the emergence of modern Western political science. Therefore, the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata* are not only historical texts but also enduring sources of political wisdom with continuing relevance in the modern world.

3. ANALYSIS OF KEY CONCEPTS IN ANCIENT INDIAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES

Ancient Indian political philosophy offers a highly developed understanding of governance, diplomacy, and political ethics that combines practical statecraft with moral reasoning. These ideas are primarily drawn from two influential sources and the epic, both of which shaped political thought in South Asia for centuries.

3.1 Governance, Statecraft, and Structure of the State

This is one of the earliest systematic manuals on political administration in world history. Traditionally attributed to Kautilya (Chanakya), advisor to Chandragupta Maurya (4th century BCE), it reflects the needs of a newly consolidated imperial state in ancient India (Thapar, 2002; Tripathi, 2004). The text strongly supports a centralized monarchy, where the king is the supreme authority responsible for law, order, taxation, espionage, and military strategy (Kangle, 1965).

A key contribution is the Saptanga theory, which defines the state as a system of seven interdependent elements rather than just a ruler (Kangle, 1965; Prakash, 2010):

(1) Swami (King): Central authority expected to be disciplined, strategic, and morally aware

(2) Amatya (Ministers): Administrative machinery handling governance and policy execution

(3) Janapada (Territory and Population): Economic base, agriculture, and citizens

(4) Durga (Fortifications): Defensive infrastructure such as forts and strategic cities

(5) Kosha (Treasury): Fiscal strength, considered essential for sustaining the state

(6) Danda (Army): Military power for enforcement and protection

(7) Mitra (Allies): External partners ensuring balance of power

This model shows that political strength was understood as multi-dimensional, relying equally on economy, military, diplomacy, and administration. Historical interpretations of the *Arthashastra* suggest that it reflects a highly pragmatic "realist" view of governance, often compared to later Western political realism (Boesche, 2002).

Another major contribution is the Mandala theory of foreign policy, which organizes international relations into concentric circles. In this model, immediate neighbors are typically considered rivals due to competing territorial interests, while states beyond them are potential allies (Kangle, 1965; Srivastava, 2011). This reflects an early structured understanding of geopolitical balance, similar in logic to modern theories of balance of power in international relations.

3.2 Diplomacy, Strategy, and International Relations

The diplomatic framework is summarized through the Sadgunya (six-fold policy), which defines six strategic approaches a ruler may adopt depending on political conditions (Kangle, 1965; Srivastava, 2011):

(1) Sandhi (Peace): Negotiated settlement when advantageous

(2) Vigraha (War): Military engagement when it increases power or security

(3) Asana (Neutrality): Staying neutral when conflict is not beneficial

(4) Yana (Alliance/Preparation): Building coalitions or preparing for action

(5) Samsraya (Dual Policy): Using mixed strategies for flexibility

(6) Dvaidhibhava (Double Policy/Deception): Strategic manipulation or indirect weakening of rivals

Unlike purely idealistic diplomatic traditions, this framework is highly flexible and situational, emphasizing that state interest (artha) is the primary guiding principle of foreign policy (Boesche, 2002).

In contrast, the present diplomacy is presented through narrative and ethical reflection rather than formal theory. A key example is Krishna's peace mission to the Kaurava court, where negotiation is attempted before war (Srivastava, 2011). The refusal of peace becomes a turning point that justifies the Kurukshetra conflict.

From these narratives, several diplomatic principles emerge:

(1) Negotiation and dialogue are the first and preferred tools of conflict resolution

(2) Alliances play a decisive role in determining political outcomes (example: Pandavas and Kauravas both rely heavily on coalition-building)

(3) Diplomacy must still consider moral legitimacy, not just strategic advantage

Thus, diplomacy in the *Mahabharata* is not purely strategic; it is deeply tied to questions of justice and righteousness.

3.3 Ethics, Power, and Political Morality

Although it is often described as realist, it does not reject ethics entirely. It argues that a ruler must maintain dharma (moral order) alongside artha (material prosperity and political stability) (Boesche, 2002; Zimmer, 1951). For example, taxation and punishment are justified only when they ensure long-term social order and economic security. The text assumes that unethical governance ultimately weakens the state, showing an indirect moral logic within its realism.

The ethical dimension is far more explicit, especially in the philosophical dialogue of the text. Here, Arjuna's moral crisis on the battlefield raises fundamental questions about violence, duty, and righteousness. Krishna's teachings emphasize svadharma (personal duty) and the idea that ethical responsibility depends on context, not rigid rules (Das, 2009; Zimmer, 1951).

3.4 Overall Perspective

The *Mahabharata* repeatedly highlights several core principles of governance and political morality. A ruler must protect justice rather than pursue personal interests, as political power is considered legitimate only when it is aligned with moral order. Furthermore, ethical dilemmas are viewed as unavoidable aspects of governance, requiring leaders to resolve them through wisdom, duty, and moral judgment rather than emotion alone (Singh, 2005).

Collectively, the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata* represent two complementary traditions of political thought. The *Arthashastra* provides a structured, strategic, and institutional blueprint for effective governance and international power management, while the *Mahabharata* offers a reflective and ethical exploration of leadership, duty, and moral conflict. These works show that ancient Indian political philosophy did not separate power from morality; it treated them as interconnected forces shaping stable and just governance.

4. PARALLELS BETWEEN ANCIENT INDIAN AND MODERN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORIES

Ancient Indian political thought and modern international relations (IR) theory often converge on surprisingly similar assumptions about power, ethics, and the behavior of states, despite being separated by more than two millennia of intellectual development. Texts like the, traditionally associated with, and modern theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism reflect parallel logics about how political systems function under conditions of competition and interdependence.

4.1 Realism and *Arthashastra*: Power as the Core of State Survival

Modern realism in IR, particularly as articulated by 20th-century scholars, argues that international politics is fundamentally driven by power, national interest, and survival in an anarchic global system. Morgenthau famously emphasized that states act rationally to maximize power and security rather than moral ideals.

A closely parallel logic appears in the, which systematically advises rulers on espionage, diplomacy, taxation, warfare, and internal administration. Composed roughly around the early centuries BCE, the text presents governance as a highly strategic enterprise where the stability of the state depends on calculated decisions, intelligence networks, and occasionally coercive measures.

The similarity lies in the rejection of idealism: both Morgenthau and Kautilya prioritize pragmatic outcomes over moral universalism. The *Arthashastra* explicitly treats neighboring states as potential threats or competitors, suggesting that rulers should use alliances, covert operations, and strategic deception when necessary to preserve sovereignty (Boesche, 2002; Kangle, 1965). This closely mirrors realist assumptions that ethical considerations often yield to strategic necessity in high-stakes international politics.

A key conceptual bridge between the two traditions is the idea of equilibrium in power distribution. Kautilya's "Mandala theory" describes a circular model of interstate relations in which immediate neighbors are typically rivals, while the enemy of a rival can become a strategic ally (Srivastava, 2011). This dynamic logic resembles the modern "balance of power" theory, where stability is maintained when no single state achieves overwhelming dominance.

4.2 Liberalism and Ethical Governance: Duty, Welfare, and Cooperation

In contrast to realism's focus on power, liberal international theory emphasizes governance through cooperation, institutions, and normative constraints. Interestingly, ancient Indian political and ethical traditions also place significant weight on governance as a moral responsibility rather than purely a strategic contest.

The epic, one of the foundational texts of Indian civilization, elaborates the concept of *Rajadharma,* the duty of kings to rule justly, protect citizens, and uphold social order (Das, 2009; Singh, 2005). Although not democratic in the modern institutional sense, this framework imposes strong ethical obligations on rulers, including fairness in taxation, protection of vulnerable groups, and accountability in decision-making.

From a modern IR perspective, this aligns with liberal principles that stress legitimate governance, rule-based order, and the welfare of populations as central to political legitimacy. Empirical liberal theory in contemporary politics often associates stable states with accountable institutions and constrained executive power, ideas conceptually echoed in *Rajadharma*, where authority is justified only through responsible conduct.

Liberalism also highlights the importance of international cooperation through treaties, diplomacy, and institutions. Ancient Indian political thought similarly recognizes diplomacy (*duta* system), treaty-making (*sandhi*), and alliance-building as essential tools of foreign policy (Srivastava, 2011). The *Arthashastra* itself classifies multiple forms of treaties and diplomatic engagements (Kangle, 1965), indicating a structured understanding of interstate cooperation. This suggests that even in early political thought, peace and stability were often seen as products of negotiated order rather than permanent conflict.

4.3 Constructivism and Cultural Context: Norms, Identity, and Moral Order

Constructivist theory in modern IR shifts attention from material power to ideas, identities, and norms as drivers of state behavior. States are not

viewed as static actors but as entities shaped by historical memory, cultural values, and shared belief systems (Wendt, 1999).

This perspective finds a strong parallel in ancient Indian political philosophy, where governance is deeply embedded in moral and cultural frameworks. The concept of *dharma*, a complex moral-ethical order regulating individual and collective behavior (Das, 2009), plays a central role in shaping political legitimacy and decision-making across texts such as the and the.

Constructivism argues that state interests are not fixed but socially constructed through shared meanings. Similarly, ancient Indian thought suggests that political action is inseparable from moral identity. A ruler is not only a strategist but also a custodian of ethical order, where legitimacy depends on alignment with culturally defined norms of righteous conduct.

In both frameworks, identity is not peripheral but foundational. Constructivists emphasize how collective identity shapes foreign policy behavior; ancient Indian traditions similarly embed political authority within a broader cultural and spiritual identity that defines what is considered legitimate rule. This interplay between ethics, culture, and governance suggests that IR cannot be fully understood without accounting for the normative environments in which political actors operate.

4.4 Theoretical Convergence

Across realism, liberalism, and constructivism, parallels with ancient Indian political thought reveal a sophisticated early understanding of power politics, ethical governance, and norm-driven behavior. The *Arthashastra* demonstrates analytical realism centuries before modern IR theory formalized it, while the *Mahabharata* embeds governance within ethical responsibility and identity formation. Together, these traditions suggest that the core dilemmas of IR security, cooperation, and legitimacy are not uniquely modern concerns but enduring features of political life across civilizations.

5. CASE STUDIES: INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND REGIONAL DIPLOMATIC PRACTICES

India's foreign policy has evolved as a blend of strategic autonomy, ethical considerations, and pragmatic engagement with global powers. One of its most defining frameworks is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), formally established in 1961 at the Belgrade Conference under leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Josip Broz Tito, and Gamal Abdel Nasser (Nanda, 1998; Zoller, 2011). At its core, NAM was a response to Cold War bipolarity, where newly independent states sought to avoid alignment with either the United States or the Soviet Union. Today, NAM includes 120 member states, representing a significant portion of the Global South. India's approach within this framework reflects an enduring preference for strategic autonomy, a principle that allows engagement with multiple global powers without formal military or political alignment (Jha, 1997; Yadav, 2000). This approach closely aligns with the Mandala theory from Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (circa 4th century BCE), which views IR as a dynamic system of shifting alliances based on national interest and balance of power rather than fixed loyalties (Boesche, 2002; Kangle, 1965).

Alongside strategic autonomy, India's foreign policy is also shaped by a tradition often described as moral diplomacy. This approach draws intellectual and ethical influence from ancient Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata*, particularly the concept of *Rajdharma*, which emphasizes the duty of rulers to uphold justice, fairness, and the welfare of both citizens and broader humanity (Das, 2009; Singh, 2005). In practical terms, this is reflected in India's consistent advocacy for global peace, nuclear disarmament, climate justice, and multilateral cooperation in forums such as the United Nations (Vanaik, 2006). India's peacekeeping contributions, having deployed over 290,000 personnel in more than 50 UN peacekeeping missions since 1950, further demonstrate this ethical dimension in action, linking moral responsibility with international engagement.

A comparable set of diplomatic strategies can be observed in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967 and currently comprising 10 member states. ASEAN's diplomatic model is rooted in pragmatism, particularly in managing relations with major powers such as the United States and China. The region's geographic and economic positioning between these powers necessitates a careful balancing act. ASEAN's collective GDP is over $3.6 trillion (nominal, recent estimates), making it a significant economic bloc whose stability depends heavily on maintaining peaceful external relations. This pragmatic balancing reflects principles similar to Kautilya's recommendation of strategic alliances and counter-balancing measures to ensure regional stability and security (Boesche, 2002).

At the same time, ASEAN's diplomatic culture strongly emphasizes consensus-building and non-confrontational dialogue, often referred to as the ASEAN Way. This includes prioritizing informal consultation, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes (Wright, 2012). These practices reflect ethical dimensions comparable to ancient Indian diplomatic thought, where dialogue, restraint, and moral responsibility were considered essential to sustaining long-term political order. The emphasis on avoiding escalation and maintaining harmony resonates with narrative traditions in the *Mahabharata*, where the consequences of conflict and the importance of righteous negotiation are repeatedly highlighted (Srivastava, 2011).

6. DISCUSSION: CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF ANCIENT INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Ancient Indian political philosophy continues to offer significant insights into modern governance, diplomacy, and ethics due to its integrated approach to power and morality. Texts such as the *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti* (though the latter is more socially normative and debated in modern interpretation) present governance as a combination of administrative efficiency and ethical responsibility (Prakash, 2010). The *Arthashastra*, for example, provides detailed frameworks on taxation, intelligence systems, diplomacy, and military strategy, while simultaneously grounding statecraft in the concept of dharma (righteous duty). This dual focus reflects an early understanding that political stability depends not only on coercive power but also on legitimacy and ethical governance.

In the realm of diplomacy and IR, Kautilya's theory of six-fold foreign policy (Shadgunya), including peace, war, neutrality, alliance, dual policy, and seeking protection (Kangle, 1965; Srivastava, 2011), illustrates a sophisticated understanding of international dynamics that remains relevant in analyzing modern geopolitical behavior. These ideas parallel contemporary realist and strategic theories, yet differ in their explicit incorporation of ethical reasoning and long-term stability as guiding principles. In a world increasingly characterized by multipolar tensions, economic interdependence, and security dilemmas, such frameworks provide historically grounded perspectives on negotiation, alliance formation, and conflict avoidance.

The integration of ancient Indian philosophical traditions into modern IR theory contributes to a more pluralistic and globally representative intellectual framework (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Tickner & Blaney, 2012). While Western theories such as realism and liberalism dominate mainstream discourse, incorporating non-Western traditions like those of ancient India broadens analytical depth and cultural context. This allows policymakers and scholars to interpret global issues not only through power politics but also through ethical responsibility, cultural continuity, and long-term civilizational thinking.

Overall, the continued relevance of ancient Indian political philosophies lies in their ability to combine ethical governance, strategic adaptability, and diplomatic flexibility. Whether reflected in India's non-alignment strategy or ASEAN's balancing diplomacy, these principles demonstrate that ancient intellectual traditions can still inform and enrich contemporary global political practice when interpreted in a modern context.

7. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INTEGRATING ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT INTO MODERN DISCOURSE

One of the most complex difficulties in applying ancient philosophical ideas such as those from early Indian traditions to modern IR lies in cultural translation. These ideas were originally developed within very different social, political, and linguistic contexts. When they are interpreted today, there is a constant risk of oversimplification or distortion. Scholars in translation studies and comparative philosophy often note that even key terms (*such as dharma, rajadharma, or artha*) do not have direct equivalents in modern political vocabulary (Das, 2009). As a result, careful hermeneutic work is required to preserve meaning while making concepts accessible to contemporary audiences. This process is further complicated by the

could further enrich the understanding of ancient Indian political ideas within contemporary global governance.

8. CONCLUSION

Ancient Indian political philosophy, particularly articulated in the *Arthashastra* (attributed to Kautilya/Chanakya, c. 4th century BCE during the Maurya period) and the *Mahabharata* (composed over several centuries, roughly 400 BCE–400 CE), has had a lasting intellectual influence on modern theories of politics and IR. These texts are not merely historical or religious works; they function as early systematic treatises on governance, strategy, ethics, and statecraft, offering structured frameworks that continue to be studied in political science and IR scholarship.

The *Arthashastra* presents a highly pragmatic and analytical model of governance. It outlines detailed administrative systems, taxation policies, intelligence networks, military organization, and diplomatic strategies. Its famous mandala theory of foreign relations describes states as natural rivals and allies arranged in concentric circles of power, an idea often compared to modern balance-of-power theory in IR (Boesche, 2002). The text also emphasizes espionage, economic management, and strategic alliances as essential tools of state survival, closely aligning with what later Western political theorists would define as realpolitik. Its systematic approach reflects an early understanding that political stability depends on a combination of economic strength, internal control, and external strategic positioning.

The *Mahabharata* provides a more ethical and philosophical exploration of governance and power. Through narratives such as the Kurukshetra War and dialogues like the Bhagavad Gita, it examines moral ambiguity in leadership, the justification of war, and the burden of decision-making under conflict. These themes parallel modern discussions in just war theory, humanitarian intervention, and political ethics, where questions of legitimacy, proportionality, and moral responsibility remain central. The text highlights that political authority is not only about power acquisition but also about dharma (duty/ethical order), making it relevant to contemporary debates on human rights and ethical governance.

Both works also demonstrate an integrated view of domestic and international politics. The *Arthashastra* links internal administrative efficiency with external security, while the *Mahabharata* shows how internal dynastic disputes can escalate into large-scale conflict. This reflects a systems-based understanding of politics that aligns with modern interdisciplinary approaches in IR, where internal instability is often seen as a driver of external conflict.

Despite its interpretative nature, this study demonstrates that ancient Indian political philosophies continue to provide valuable conceptual frameworks for understanding governance, diplomacy, and ethics in IR. Further interdisciplinary and empirical research will help clarify their evolving relevance within contemporary global political theory.

In conclusion, the continued relevance of the *Arthashastra* and the *Mahabharata* lies in their dual emphasis on strategic realism and ethical responsibility. They provide early yet sophisticated models for understanding power, diplomacy, and governance. Their insights remain significant in a globalized world where states must balance national interest with ethical obligations, and where political decisions increasingly require both strategic calculation and moral reflection.

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