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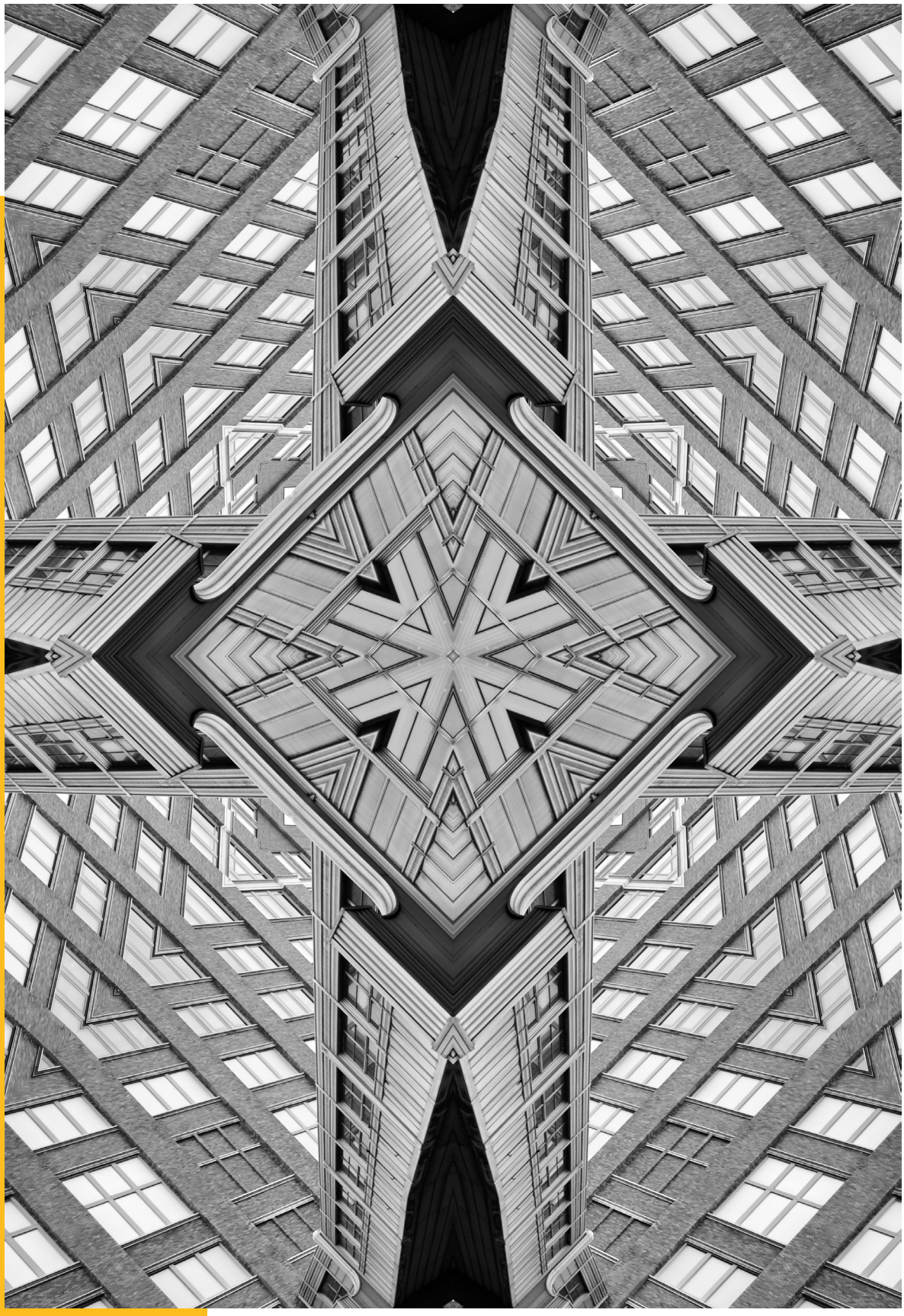

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Historicising the *Arthaśāstra*: Early Fiscal-Military States in South Asia

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Abstract

The late-first millennium BCE *Arthaśāstra* is popularly known for its vile recommendations—a perception that tends to overshadow its far more comprehensive and holistic message on state-building. While the treatise itself gives no geographical or chronological pointers, this paper takes a historicist approach to contextualise it in time and space to show that it was not a one-off product but the result of an entrenched tradition of enlightened state-building on the Gangetic plains, in many ways anticipating the fiscal–military states of pre-modern Europe that had ushered in the modern world. It also discusses why this tradition would later be subverted.

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Introduction

The *Arthaśāstra* is conventionally attributed to Kauṭilya, who is believed to be Cāṇakya, who in turn is equated with Viṣṇugupta, 'minister' to the first Mauryan emperor, Candragupta. This identification locates the text as having been written in the middle of the 4th century BCE, when Mauryan rule was established. Both these contentions—authorship and date—have been questioned by some scholars, and not without reason. Philological studies place the text somewhere between the second century BCE and the third century CE, and its author in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, prominent claimants being Northern Maharashtra and Gujarat.[a,1]

Establishing the correct authorship and period of any historical text is usually a prerequisite for understanding it in its proper context. Such exercise in philology and antiquarianism, however, is untenable in India given the current state of data gathering. An alternative approach is close reading and comparative analysis with relevant contexts, either coeval or chronologically disparate. Attempting to do so, this paper seeks to historicise the *Arthaśāstra*, positing that it documents an early political philosophy of what compares well with the fiscal-military state—a type of state that had geared its economy to raise and sustain standing armies by subjecting its populace to regular taxes and implementing fiscal innovations such as national debt and organised credit, albeit with a number of crucial differences. The paper also examines why the *Arthaśāstra*'s enlightened approach was subsequently undermined by socio-political forces beyond its control.

a All citations from the *Arthaśāstra* in this paper are made comparatively from Patrick Olivelle, trans., *King, Governance, and Law in India: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra* (Oxford, 2013) and R. Shamashastry, trans. and ed., *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (Dev, 2021 [1956]).

Context and Character

Seeking comparable parallels brings to mind the Italian theorist Machiavelli, who was first compared with Cāṇakya/Kauṭilya/Viṣṇugupta (hereafter, Kautilya) by the renowned German sociologist Max Weber.[2] Weber's comparison was a take on the *Arthaśāstra*'s shrewd recommendations on how a king must deploy unscrupulous means to secure his kingdom and his own position in it, which uncannily resemble Machiavelli's recommendations in *Il Principe* (*The Prince*) to secure the throne of a 16th-century post-feudal Italian city-state.

Machiavelli went little beyond these recommendations in *Il Principe*. One school of thought posits that Machiavelli had really meant the book to be a satire on the Italian ruling classes, intended to expose their devilishness.[3] In comparison, his *Discorsi sopra la Prima Deca di Tito Livio*, i.e., a commentary on Livy's history of Rome (common title: *Discourses on Livy*), is a more mature work, dealing with several aspects of actually running a state. In the *Discourses,* Machiavelli appears to be upholding the traditions of republicanism and Renaissance humanism, but even here, his view is that power is best held by one prince and not the multitude. In other words, to Machiavelli, the republic needs the kind of prince that he had visualised in *Il Principe*.

The expedients the *Arthaśāstra* recommends for the prince to negotiate his way through governance and survive in what was essentially a rough neighbourhood, match the shrewdness of those suggested by Machiavelli. Yet that is not all there is to the former. The dangers faced by the *Arthaśāstra*'s ruler differed from those confronted by Florentine and Milanese princes not only in degree, but also in kind—the ecosphere wherein the latter operated was characterised by small and well-defined mercantile and post-feudal city-states, with princely families wielding forces (largely *condottieri* companies and various other freelancers) to dominate the proceedings and coerce loyalty and obedience. In contrast, the ecosphere of the *Arthaśāstra* was more vast, comprising different types of power-holders, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Further, such recommendations are not all that there is to the *Arthaśāstra*, whose main concerns are with the security and prosperity of the

state's peoples (through measures such as taxation, land reforms, and empowerment of the weak and the poor) and making the state a prosperous and lasting institution, whereas these concerns are not echoed by *Il Principe* which stops at the establishment and survival of the prince. *Discourses on Livy* focuses on the sustenance of Machiavelli's state, but ventures little into human resources development. Thus, the conventional comparison is too quick, rather clichéd, and bordering on the facile.

It is important to understand the type of state that Kautilya visualised. To Roger Boesche, author of *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and the Arthaśāstra*, the welfare measures recommended in the book suggested a form of welfare state bordering on a 'socialistic' monarchy.[4] However, it is seen that much ownership of agrarian land in Kautilya's state was private (except for the 'king's land', communally owned pastures, and the forests, which were beyond agriculture and owned by no one). Kautilya was also more concerned with ensuring a free and fair market than actually controlling that market or dictating prices. Thus, Thomas Trautmann, author of *Arthaśāstra: The Science of Wealth* posits, rather than a welfare state with a centralised, bureaucratic monolith, Kautilya's ideal state was really a regulated system where market forces remained at work.[5]

However, the *Arthaśāstra* also suggests heavy state expenditure on various projects, state ownership of resources (such as elephant-yielding forests, and mines), and an incisive secret service (which should be *kaṇṭaka-śodha* or thorn-picking, and *ugra*, or hardline and combative) aimed not at coercing obedience of an unreliable population (in contrast to Machiavelli) but at diffusing inimical internal and external factors. It recommends realistic diplomacy, a strong standing army, and control of the 'extra personal' state over its own destiny. Such proposals throw as much doubt on the free market view of Trautmann as they do on Boesche's notion of welfare state. The fact is that both these forms of the modern state are far too recent and mature, having undergone passage through other forms of political organisations. The nature of the state in *Arthaśāstra* requires an examination of older forms of states than these, and also deeper contextualisation with the uniqueness of Indian socio-political systems.

Nature of the State in the *Arthaśāstra*

The *Arthaśāstra* is a prescriptive book, and says little about how its recommendations should be implemented. Nor does it provide definite geographical pointers—the *rājamaṇḍala* (the fabled 'circle of kings'),[b] for instance, is a schematic picturisation. The treatise opens by saying that it has been prepared by "drawing together the treatises on success composed by former teachers."[6] Kauṭilya goes far beyond the treatises he refers to by formally regularising aspects of statecraft that do not find any mention in them. It can be posited that there was an extant and thriving discourse on *artha*,[c] on statehood and governance, at the time the book was written, which was formalised as the *Arthaśāstra*.

In *The Kautilya Arthaśāstra: A Critical Study,* R. P. Kangle places the text in the *Lokāyata* tradition of the 6th century BCE,[7] which was at that time contending with both religious dogmatism and the radicalising ideas of Buddhism, Jainism, Ajīvika-ism, and other brands of *Sāṅkhya* thought, against a backdrop of political turmoil.[8] Given this, it is not surprising that its authorship was diffused, possibly comprising inputs from a group of authors rather than a single individual. In any case, there was a tradition of rewriting, overwriting, and reusing existing material and existing names at the time.[d]

One main concern of the *Arthaśāstra* is the survival of the aspirant king in a very rough environment, where he cannot trust even his queen.[e] The text prescribes several means for the king to ensure his personal safety, as well as that of his state, within the *rājamaṇḍala*. Within this system, more complex than simply chaotic, the *Arthaśāstra* provides further advice on how to use shrewd diplomatic manoeuvres, and cunning—even faithless—

b The *rājamaṇḍala* is the 'circle of kings', or leaders of kingdoms, surrounding each kingdom (or state)—i.e., its close and distant neighbours. The *Arthaśāstra* divides them into four kinds: the state leader concerned, *vijīgiṣu*; the enemy states, *ari*; the buffer states, *madhyama*; and the indifferent or neutral states, *udāsāna*, and elaborates on how to deal with each.

c 'Artha' in the *Arthaśāstra* means 'the pursuit of material gain and prosperity by the state'. It is one of the four goals of Hindu philosophy, along with *dharma* (righteousness), *kāma* (sexual pleasure), and *mokṣa* (liberation).

d This is seen in several other texts, such as the *Nakula Aśvaśāstra* and the *Śukranītisāra*, which are all attributed to legendary authors.

e This, alongside indications of parricide of kings of early Magadha, could allude to Neolithic forms of matrilineal succession—a discussion that is beyond the scope of the present paper.

expedients to survive. (Such use of expedients is similarly extolled in the *Āpaddharma* section, Book 12, of the *Mahabharata*.) But it does more. While its refrain is that people accept the king's authority in return for promised protection from *mātsyanyāya* (the law of the fishes—big fish eating small fish, or jungle raj), the king is also told that he is a servant of the state, and must ensure that it functions as a vehicle for social prosperity and improvement.

The idea that the state is accepted by the people to guard against *mātsyanyāya* is really *ex post facto* justification—there is no mention in the *Arthaśāstra* that this was a consensus, nor is there any empirical evidence of such a social contract. Thus, encapsulating the *Arthaśāstra's* political philosophy as one of "the king as a mere seller of protection", or the king-subject relationship as a contract based on the reciprocal relations between taxation and protection, is not quite sufficient.[9]

The backdrop of the *Arthaśāstra* is clearly a fractured environment with several interest groups and power holders, such as *śreṇī*, *kula*, *puga*, *gaṇa*, and *saṅgha*—only a few of which have a precise meaning, and which largely imply corporations and occupational guilds that were possibly forerunners of endogamous occupational caste groups, clans, tribal groups, and war bands. There is no indication in the text that the ubiquitous *śreṇī* (associations or guilds), or even the *jana* (pastoral groups) living as self-governing *saṅgha* (federations) actually decided by consensus to accept a king. Many were potentially disruptive war bands (*śastropajīvi*—those who live by their weapons) ready to provide mercenary service (*āyudhajīvi saṅgha*),[f,g] who had to be subjugated.

It can be seen how different the threats faced by the prince of the *Arthaśāstra* were from those that confronted Machiavelli's prince. Hammering these inimical forces into subjugation was not really possible as, when united, they were too powerful. Rather, the king was advised to cleverly negotiate with them, disperse them whenever possible, and deal individually with their leaders.[h] Consensus in such a situation could be only *ex post facto*,

f The *Aśvaka* are referred to as *vartaśastr'opajīvin*, that is, engaged in agriculture and war-fighting. See: *Artha*, XI: 1.4.

g *Artha*., XI: 1

h Kautilya acknowledges the continuity of the *gaṇa/saṅgha*/oligarchy in Book XI. See: M.V. Krishna Rao, "Guild and State in Kautilya's Arthasastra," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 11/ 1 (January–March 1950): 51–65.

i.e., after battles had already been fought or someone had negotiated his way to the top. Thus, the appearance of states in the complex milieu of the mid-first millennium BCE in the Indo-Gangetic plains was not a result of deliberate consensus but a form of strong emergence[i] from among entrenched interest groups.

These states were organic entities, markedly different from earlier chiefdoms which had been loose amalgamations of tribal or clannish oligarchs.[10] Kings in these entities required armies to attain their position and then maintain it. Such armies, discussed at length in Book II Chapter 33, are a major concern of the *Arthaśāstra*. Of the various categories comprising such armies, which include *śreṇī* troops (supplied by trade guilds) under their own commanders (*śreṇīmukhya*), mercenary war bands, miscellaneous hostages, renegades, and prisoners, the *Arthaśāstra* regards the *maula* (from *mūla* or root, meaning fundamental component of the populace) and *bhṛtya* (hirelings) troops as the best, implying a preference for a regularly recruited standing army.

A passive role for the state was anathema to Kautilya.[11] For the *Arthaśāstra*'s author (or authors) the state had a positive role: to improve all aspects of life of its people, including their knowledge and the spirit of *anvīkṣiki* (enquiry), ensure *yogakṣema*, (prosperity through agriculture, trade, and husbandry),[j] and enable progress on the paths of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*—righteousness, prosperity, and aesthetics, respectively. This called for public expenditure, with a strong supervisory role of the state, even though much of the work was carried out through the agency of various *śreṇī*s. The *Arthaśāstra* also insists upon a fair and diligent, not grasping and rapacious, revenue and taxation mechanism, stressing the establishment of a corps of public servants—administrative, revenue, judicial, military, indeed in all aspects of the state's and the community's life—manned by people selected and promoted for their ability and not for their family status or connections; in other words, a meritocracy.

Just as the king (prince) wielded force (whether actively or passively) in coming to power and ensuring continuity, he must ensure, in Kautilya's view, through judicious use of his authority to discipline (*daṇda*; i.e., the

i The first states that emerged in this complex adaptive system or milieu could not really have been expected and forecasted, and thus can be seen as instances of 'strong emergence'.

j Originally, 'addition to the (nomad) camp'.

rod) adherence to the social aims mentioned earlier. But Kautilya insists that the *daṇḍa* (whose importance was widely acknowledged at the time[k]) be used with consideration and self-discipline,[l] eschewing both overuse, which could lead to terror, and underuse which could cause anarchy. This goes back to the nature of the king who must not turn a tyrant but work towards the betterment of the populace.

The king was the symbol of the state and social authority, and all other authority derived from him; he was by his own authority sovereign, and required no ratification by religious agencies. Therefore, he is advised to evolve laws and rules wisely, having considered usage and practice and consulted elders and other experts, because once issued, laws would be inviolate. In other words, the king of the *Arthaśāstra* was not merely a passive maintainer of *dharma* and peace, but an active agent in the betterment of the populace, regulating all aspects of social life (including payments to priests in the sacrificial religion[m]). Being such a ruler required the king to be learned, adept in philosophical texts, perhaps a philosopher himself. This view of the king's authority comes close to monism, but given that the diverse power groups in his kingdom had only been subjugated, not stamped out, the definition "pluralistically determined monism" appears more apt.

k For a discussion on the concept of *daṇḍa* in Indian writings, see Mom Roychoudhury, "Various Concepts of Danda in Sanskrit," *Heritage (Journal of the Bethune College)* III (2016): 85–87.

l *Artha.*, I: 5.1

m *Artha.*, III: 14.186

Emergence of the 'Modern' State

What the *Arthaśāstra* envisaged can be compared to the modern state which emerged in 1,500–1,700 CE in Europe. Prior to this, power in Europe was largely diffused among local authorities such as barons and other feudal lords, churches, peasant communities, and independent cities, all of which insisted on autonomy and authority to wage war without reference to the king. The king's protocol priority was shaky, with little lien over local authorities, and he could rule only by consensus. Such a diffused situation started changing with the advent of pike-armed infantry and firearms from the 12th century, which increasingly thwarted the supposedly invincible knightly cavalries. Kings who could recruit such infantries, and also organise cannonry, could not only drive feudal cavalry off the battlefield but also squeeze feudal classes out of their castles. Starting with some comparative advantage in violence,[12] kings had concentrated authority and sidelined regional powers by the 16th century; this was the culmination of feudalism that established the state's monopoly over violence.[13]

Even so, it would be erroneous to suppose that kingly authority arose solely through coercion and use of military power; rather, armies only strengthened the bargaining positions of kings in implicit negotiations and compromise. The 16th-17th centuries were an age of discovery, of world-ranging exploration, the rise of global commerce, the influx of specie and bullion, and global wars, which local power holders also wanted to capitalise upon; they were eager to cooperate with the king. Kings tried to create organisations to harness resources, including human and societal resources, to participate in these global conflicts—such participation determined their kingdoms as great powers. They sought standing armies, and geared their economies for sustained use of these armies by subjecting their populace to high taxes and implementing fiscal innovations such as national debt or credit-providing institutions, which is the simplest definition of the fiscal-military state.

The term 'fiscal-military state' was conceived by historians working on 18th-century Britain, a period when the process had fully caught on.[14] It was natural that early studies of the fiscal-military state would focus on Britain, which was precocious among such states vying for world

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domination. However, in his *War and State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic, and Sweden as Fiscal-Military States, 1500–1660*, Jan Glete also studied the earlier states that demonstrated such characteristics.[15] Taken holistically, it is seen that the term 'fiscal-military state' is far more nuanced than its simplistic definition as a state that could deploy an efficient revenue mechanism to sustain a standing army for prolonged conflict.

Applied to more mature forms of such states, such as Britain, the simple definition gets fleshed out: such states were more than just wielders of armies, having taken over most social responsibilities (such as security, communications, and irrigation) from regional and social institutions, and able to implement long-term social policies. Their centralised webs of bureaucratic departments could enforce shared interests by adjusting conflicting priorities of stakeholders through cooperation and negotiation. To Glete, it was this ability to provide organisation sustained through ability to control and tax, rather than coercion/consensus, that transformed the relationship between state and society into the fiscal-military state.[16]

States also grew into impersonal or extra-personal institutions, with regular administrative and military services manned by officers loyal to state policies and not to individual kings or dynasties. These men, largely from commoner classes, had chosen administration, bureaucracy, or the military as a career, and held their positions by royal authority and not social origin or inherited position. This impersonal existence enabled not only sustenance of long-term policies, but also accumulation and institutionalisation of experience; generals commanding armies did not need to start afresh for each campaign unlike earlier, when much of their energies were spent in managing coherence of their hastily levied and squabbling forces. Institutionalisation of government offices also led to impersonal offices, where men could function keeping their private positions separate, and from which they could safely retreat without a successor having to resort to violence.

States functioning this way found they could harness social energies better, ensuring education, betterment of human capital through economics and knowledge, and providing better life experience for their citizens. Various sections of society could now cooperate with, and respect their obligations

to, one another. Such developments were increasingly formalised by the time of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648[n] which acknowledged the inviolate sovereignty of the state from without, and its monopoly over violence within. So too, the development of civic inheritance in England after the Glorious Revolution[o] of November 1688 allowed it to meet many of the goals mentioned earlier in a sustained manner.[17]

The fiscal-military state was obviously more than a mere seller of protection, a function that regional power holders had also performed earlier despite not having standing armies, though such protection was local, subjective, and temperamental. Rather, it was through a complex interplay of the demand for protection, stability, economy, and human capital development, and the supply of organisation and leadership that the modern fiscal-military state emerged. Even among these states, various bargains between what was sacrificed and what was gained were negotiated, leading to different kinds of states in different arenas. Britain depended more on consensual means (where the peerage held back against the king, and commoners against both, and yet cooperated, at least after the Glorious Revolution), whereas states such as Prussia, Russia, and France were far more autocratic.

n The Peace of Westphalia, a series of treaties signed in 1648 in two cities of north-western Germany, brought an end to the 30-year war in Europe between warring Catholic and Protestant states and established the autonomy of nation states from religious authority.

o The Glorious Revolution of November 1688 saw the British Parliament depose the last of the Stuart kings, James II of England (who was James VII of Scotland and a closet Catholic), and replace him with his daughter Mary II and her (Protestant Dutch) husband William III. It established the Parliament as the ruling power, replacing absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy.

Empirical Evidence from Magadha and Contemporary States

At the theoretical level, it can be seen that most aspects of Kautilya's envisaged state were indeed features of the European fiscal-military states in their more mature forms. Conventionally associated with the Mauryan Magadha kingdom—though the text does not once mention either—the *Arthaśāstra* is in fact a gist of centrist doctrines that emerged in the Gangetic plains during the mid-first millennium BCE, duly complemented by works such as the *Nītisāra*.[p] The *Arthaśāstra* provides no empirical data, but such data can be gleaned, albeit imperfectly, from a close reading of the substantial body of literature of that time that has survived, including Buddhist texts, Greek accounts, and several *Purāṇa*s, which can help discern causal mechanisms at work in the socio-political arena. Taking this critical realist approach, the sub-sections that follow examine the available information, and arrange it as per the principal features of the fiscal-military state.

Anarchy and the Rise of State Power

The earliest picture of the Indo-Gangetic region is one of chaos, with 50 or more independently identifiable Vedic tribes consolidating into fewer *janapada*s (footprints of the tribe) of dispensations ranging from tribal to oligarchical. The territorial diversity of South Asia determined how these *janapada*s behaved. The Indo-Gangetic Divide around Delhi-Mathura, with the Punjab in the north and the Deccan in the south, were arid regions, while the Gangetic plains east of the Divide and the coastal plains surrounding the Deccan were comparatively more humid. As a result, the former was open and pastoral, while the eastern plains were covered in dense primeval forests (*mahāvana*) and tended towards sedentary agriculture (increasingly possible as iron axes could clear the forests and ploughshare turn the heavy soil).

Though the demarcation is not absolute, and features of the former could be found in parts of the latter, and vice versa, there were a few consolidated tracts of homogeneous ecospheres. The Gangetic plains had tracts of forests, urbanities, and sedentary agriculture in clearings, and

p The *Nītisāra*, another treatise on politics and statecraft dating from the same time as the *Arthaśāstra*, is said to have been written by Kamandaki, believed to be a disciple of Kautilya.

arid scrub or grasslands, all in close proximity. Some *janapada* groups were mobile, and long tracks across these ecospheres from west to east can be discerned in the case of some of them, such as the Mālava/Malla or the Aśvaka. Though each *janapada* was named after a tribe, they comprised diverse groups following different lifestyles, not all of whom were equally ready to acknowledge authority; for example, nomadic pastoralists on arid stretches are difficult to tax and govern. This created what the late Dutch Indologist Jan Heesterman called the 'inner frontier',[18] with central authority finding it difficult to extend throughout a *janapada*.

Early texts from this region, such as the *Brāhmaṇa*s, do not mention anything like a state and indicate only chiefships and oligarchies intent on suppressing a volatile class of *Kṣatriya* barons. Within this milieu were pastoral tribes operating as war bands, available for mercenary hire or ready to wage war themselves. In this scenario, archaic procedures of fighting over pastures, such as the *rājasūya* (raids for booty and subsequent distribution) and the *aśvamedha* (realignment of pasture usage protocols by letting a horse run free to choose its pastures) appear to have been repurposed as the great *Śrauta* (fire sacrifice) ritual to dominate fluid surroundings.[q,19] They now centred on the establishment of territorial kingdoms daring rivals to impede the procedures. One social function of the elaborate sacrificial religion was possibly to divert the energies of barons and chiefs away from endless wars.

Out of this turmoil is said to have emerged 16 'greater *janapada*s' (*mahajanapada*s); in reality, the lists of these 16 vary across sources, with later ones including more of eastern *janapada*s. This indicates a gravitation of power and prosperity towards the east, where greater rainfall supported better agriculture, surpluses, and populations. *Janapada*s on the Gangetic plains tended to be agro-pastoralist—sedentary agricultural groups that extended satellite 'ranches' into open areas, the latter themselves turning sedentary in time. On the fringes, along the 'inner frontier', roamed tribal groups following free-ranging herdsmanship, labelled *vrātya* in memory of an archaic rite of passage that comprised living as brigands and cattle-rustlers in the wilderness. Such freebooting war-band tribes maintained their *saṅgha* (joint decision-making/ democratic) format, and often formed their own states—the Kamboja and Gopa (Yadava) founded states in North

q The *aśvamedha* implied a regal spectacle in the countryside, which served a purpose similar to the Mughal peregrination to demonstrate the power of the king.

Bengal and Bardhaman in historical times. The apprehension of itinerant tribes capturing political power comes across in the 5th-century CE Sanskrit play *Mṛt-shakaṭikā* (or *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, 'The Little Clay Cart').

Oligarchy was the foundational political format of the *janapada*s,[r] many of which were *gaṇa/saṅgha* in their decision-making and of *vrātya* origin. Magadha and Kosala, two *mahājanapada*s featuring in all lists, demonstrate the earliest transitions to monarchy.[20] Magadha, indeed one of the few *janapada*s not named after a tribe, went on to a remarkable career of monarchy spanning the better part of a millennium. Among its kings was the legendary Jarāsandha, mentioned in the *Mahabharata*; during the time of the Buddha, it was ruled by the Haryanka dynasty. The Haryanka were followed by a string of lineages—Śiśunāga, Nanda, Maurya, Śuṅga, and Kāṇva, and, after a hiatus when the centre of political gravity seemed to have shifted to Mathura due to Scytho-Parthian and Kushan activity, the Gupta. The political centre of the later Pāla rule was also a little east of Magadha.

While these polities emerged due to ease in taxing sedentary populations, they needed to also reign in the 'chaos and lawlessness' prevailing across the inner frontier. Entire passages in the *Arthaśāstra* deal with the subjugation of the *saṅgha*s. Anticipating the *Arthaśāstra*'s recommendation by a century or more, the Haryaṅka ruler Ajātaśatru brought the *gaṇasaṅgha*s of the Sakyas, Kāśī-Kośala, and Vṛjji (Licchavis of Vaisali) to heel; many kings played early rounds of the 'Great Game'[s] with the *Vrātya* horse-dealers, for which the *Ugra* secret police and *Kaṇṭaka-śodha* assassins recommended by the *Arthaśāstra* came in handy. The states also needed to extend their writ across the riverine system infested by the *hiṅsṛka* pirates. The *Arthaśāstra* ascribes the task of reining them in to the king's inland navy.

r Their decision-making procedures survived in the Buddhist Hīnayāna church.

s The 19th-century rivalry between Britain and Russia over Afghanistan and other parts of Central Asia.

Character of the Magadhan Army

Magadha carried its arms across the length and breadth of the subcontinent. The last king of the Nanda dynasty, Dhana-Nanda[t] (whose regnal title was *Augrasainya*) is probably the same as the 'Agrammes of Palibothra' mentioned in Greek records; his army's reputation was such that Alexander's troops refused to fight him. A detailed examination of Magadhan campaigns[21] shows it destroying local lords, *Vrātya* tribes, Scythian remnants, forest chiefs, and smaller versions of itself. The army was famed for its four divisions or *'caturaṅga':* infantry and elephants, with chariotry and cavalry in auxiliary roles. Magadha's position gave it control over large surpluses and non-agrarian populations, which enabled it to raise and maintain such a massive army. Greek historians Strabo and Arrian[u] have stated that Magadha society of that time was divided into seven classes,[v] of which the two largest were farmers and soldiers.[22] Magadha kings would also access the iron mines and elephant-yielding forests of Chhotanagpur and Central India, engaging in campaigns against the *Āṭavī*s (forest tribes regarded as 'beyond the pale', though often engaging in regular trade with settled kingdoms) and *Vyāghrarāja*s (chieftains of tribes in tiger infested regions).[w] Its authority over the riverine system allowed it to control mercantile networks and logistically support distant campaigns.

The historian and diplomat Megasthenes[x] has noted that Magadhan troops were heavily paid, had servants to look after their weapons and horses, and spent their leisure time in "idleness and drinking bouts, being maintained at the expense of the royal treasury," making merry when not engaged in war "so that they make their expeditions quickly when need arises since they bring nothing else of their own but their bodies."[23] The *Arthaśāstra* lists six kinds of troops that could be available to a king

t As per Buddhist lore, Dhana-Nanda had insulted Kautilya. The latter got his revenge by training Candragupta Maurya to raise a more efficient army and defeat Dhana-Nanda in 321 BCE and establish a separate dynasty.

u Arrian is regarded as the most reliable chronicler of Alexander the Great's campaigns.

v The seven classes were farmers, soldiers, thinkers, herdsmen, artisans, judges, and government officials.

w For a discussion on the role of elephants in kingdom formation, see Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Orient Blackswan, 2018).

x His *Indica,* which survives only in fragments, is cited by other chroniclers.

in times of war: the *maula* (standing army), the *bhṛtya* (hirelings), the *śreṇi* (mercenaries supplied by guilds), the *mitra* (troops provided by allies), the *amitra* (deserters from the enemy camp), and the *āṭavis* (tribals); it enjoins that *maula* and *bhṛtya* are preferable to *śreṇīs*; it also insists that all retiring soldiers should surrender their weapons and other gear before leaving. Taken together, these suggest a standing army of regulars, equipped by the government. It was the creation of such a standing army that enabled Magadha to reduce its dependence on *śreṇi* troops, mercenaries, hostages, renegades, and prisoners.

Though the *Arthaśāstra* is silent on the training of soldiers, it provides comprehensive and strict guidelines for their discipline. The *Anguttara Nikāya,* which dates from the same period, maintains that a recruit's worth lay in the aptitude displayed during training and not social origin. In all, Magadha was best poised among the *janapada*s to raise and maintain a well-trained standing army made up of regular soldiers who were paid a salary and not per assignment as was usual for contracted armies. The army was one of the seven wings of the state and gave Magadha a strong bargaining position with which it managed to suppress if not stamp out inimical forces, sweeping away opponents, including lesser versions of itself, and outlasting them with superior logistics.

Administrative Machinery and Taxation

There is little empirical reference to the six kinds of troops (mentioned earlier) recommended by the *Arthaśāstra*, but the very success of Magadha suggests their existence in one form or the other. There had to be organisations to recruit, equip, and train the four wings of the *caturaṅga*, and commissariats to manage overland and overwater logistics. Overland logistics was managed by the *Go-adhyakṣa*, who possibly worked through the network of *sārthavāha*s (caravan operators) referred to repeatedly in period literature and apparently surviving up to the 19th century as the freelancing *Banjaras* and *Lubanas*. The *Navādhyakṣa* was responsible for water transport logistics, as well as keeping the rivers free of *hiṅsṛka* pirates.[y] That Candragupta Maurya was able to dismiss the hordes of sutlers and

y *Artha*., XXVIII.45.11–12

traders that usually accompanied every army on campaigns shows how effective his system was.

Moving on from the army, the *Arthaśāstra* desired that the bureaucratic administration be effective and enlightened, collecting revenue efficiently, but not in a rapacious manner. Dhana-Nanda was notorious for his parsimony and acquisitiveness; his introduction of a new scale of measure[24] was much resented. Megasthenes' observations that under Mauryan rule, taxes were fixed fairly and strictly collected, and evasions penalised, bear out these concerns. Institutionalised administration was not a Mauryan innovation—the *Vinaya* texts say that the Haryaṅka dynasty (which came much before it) had three classes of non-hereditary officials, the *Senānāyaka Mahāmātta*s, the *Vohārika Mahāmātta*s, and the *Sabbātthaka*s—generals, judges, and officers in charge of general affairs, respectively.[25] Another indication of the fiscal-military state at work comes from Megasthenes who says that with falling revenue collection, later rulers of Magadha had to debase their currency (reduce metal content in coins) to pay administrators, bureaucrats, and the standing army, ultimately weakening the state.[z]

Impersonal Institutions and Meritocracy

The *Arthaśāstra* repeatedly insists on merit being made the primary criterion for state service, be it for soldiers or administrators. Empirical indications bear out that Magadha did implement this. In spite of dismissing mercenaries, Candragupta Maurya was able to commence his campaigns immediately after the takeover of Magadha possibly because erstwhile Nanda generals like Bhaddasāla provided him their services (as indicated in the *Milindapañha*).[aa,26] This indicated that such generals were servants of the state and not of particular dynasties. In Viṣākhadatta's play *Mudrārākṣas*[ab] (*Keeper of the Royal Seal*), the eponymous prime minister (*āmātya rākṣas*), obsessed with loyalty to the now ousted Nandas, is ultimately won over by the logic of loyalty to the state of Magadha and not to a particular dynasty.

z Though Megasthenes' *Indica* is lost, it survives in fragments quoted by Diodorus, Strabo, or Arrian and a few others, which were first compiled by J.W. McCrindle, then by N.S. Kalota in 1978 and by Richard Stoneman in 2021.

aa A Buddhist text dating between 100 BCE and 200 CE, which purportedly records a dialogue between an Indian sage and a Greek king.

ab *Mudrārākṣas*, a Sanskrit play, dated between 400 and 800 CE, is a fictional chronicle of Candragupta Maurya's rise to power.

It is noteworthy that Magadha was named and not a particular dynasty which ruled it—in other words, ministers and generals were professionals serving the state of Magadha and not individual dynasties or clans. Coeval texts suggest that except for princely governors at the highest levels, most military and administrative positions, including the highest (*antarvaṅśika*), were held by individuals appointed on merit who were paid in cash. It should be noted that the *Arthaśāstra* includes repeated injunctions to carefully select and promote military and bureaucratic professionals for their ability and not their family connections. These administrators, governors, their deputies, and overseers, somewhat resembled the 'educated middle class' of modern times, putting a wider set of talents at the disposal of the state.

Even the monarchy was a meritocracy to some extent. After the Haryaṅka dynasty, all those that followed were of non-noble origin. The Śiśunāga started as ministers, the first Nanda (Mahāpadma) was either the offspring of the last Śiśunāga king Nandivardhana by a slave woman, or of his chief queen by her masseur. Some dynasties, whatever the truth, insisted upon their noble lineages, while others rejected them; their detractors denigrated them as upstarts. The Nanda title of *Sarva-Kṣatrāntaka* (Destroyer of the Baronry) suggests that it was not of *Kṣatriya* origin. The Mauryas themselves were probably the *Vrātya* Moriya of the Himalayan foothills, with strong north western affiliations—Kauṭilya is associated with Takṣaśilā,[ac] i.e., Taxila, while Candragupta was probably the 'Sandrokottus'[ad] who, according to Greek historians, met Alexander,[ae] suggesting that he was already influential and ambitious. Kharavela of Toṣāli, who would create a state similar to Magadha a century later,[af] who probably recovered Magadha from the Indo–Greeks[ag] and campaigned till Mathura in the West,[ah] was affiliated with the Meghavāhana line of

ac As a preceptor at the ancient university at that place.

ad This was the spelling used by several Greek historians, including Strabo.

ae Some Greek historians posit that 'Sandrokottus' had met Alexander to seek his support to defeat Dhana-Nanda in battle shortly before 325 BCE but had succeeded in aggravating him. Alexander ordered Sandrokottus arrested and executed, but the latter escaped.

af Late 2nd to early 1st millennium BCE is the best estimate.

ag The Dimita of the Hathigumpha inscriptions could be Demetrios, or someone later.

ah For a discussion on the topic, see Sailendra Nath Sen, *Ancient Indian History and Civilization* (Delhi: New Age, 1999), pp. 176–77.

Rāvaṇa.[27] Even Bimbisara, the first ruler of the Haryaṅka dynasty, is often found addressed by the honorific *'śreṇika,'* which associates him with guilds.

The military, bureaucratic, and administrative machinery being meritocratic, probably also respected civic inheritance, and retirement (after a certain age). Candragupta himself retired to Jaina monasteries in the Deccan in 298 BCE, having handed over authority to his son Bindusāra.

Human Capital Development

The Magadhan state seems to have been administered by that one segment of the seven-fold division of Indian society observed by the Greeks, the officials, whose characteristics and merit-based selection make them the equivalent of the modern day 'educated middle class'.[28] Creativity flourished in this era, as can be observed from the period literature, both in Sanskrit and Pali-Prakrit; it has attracted the descriptor 'Golden Age' as it sought to ensure prosperity of its citizens and found effective means of resolving disputes to maintain peace. These are the hallmarks of the ideal state envisioned in the *Arthaśāstra* and its contemporaneous treatises. Unlike Machiavelli's work, they emphasise sound administration and good governance, stressing the need for a proper balance between private, social, and public life. Such conditions were significantly reversed a few centuries after Magadha. What also emerges is that while the *Arthaśāstra* recommends a strong army, it does not extol warfare as such, seeing the use of force as a last resort.

Magadha and its Contemporaries as Fiscal-Military States

The conventional definition claims that the fiscal-military state existed only to support a large standing army and was not concerned about human capital development. In light of Magadha and the holistic recommendations of the *Arthaśāstra* which are not limited to military reform alone, can it be said that the state envisioned in the *Arthaśāstra*, and its practical application in Magadha, was not a fiscal-military state?

Despite its classical definition, the fiscal-military state was not a monolithic entity but had various forms with diverse experiences and societal impacts.[29] Empirical evidence indeed suggests that human development was a primal preoccupation of mature forms of such states, such as Britain (in a much later era than when the *Arthaśāstra* was composed). In contrast to the Sun King Louis XIV's France, which satisfied the basic characteristics of the fiscal-military state, the later, more comprehensive fiscal-military state of Napoleon went further in ensuring greater involvement of the people and demonstrating reluctance to use oppressive credit to finance armies.[30] So too, the British fiscal-military state was not solely obsessed with its military or even its navy, but was designed to positively impact its various participants,[31] ushering in alternate 'revolutions' in agriculture, communications, and credit and finances, and implementing a revenue system that was far from rapacious.[32]

Thus the fiscal-military states acted as vehicles and agents of the 18th-century Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, bringing in unprecedented human resources development and ultimately ushering in the modern world. This extended to their militaries as well. The fiscal-military state made possible moral criticism of war because of its exorbitant costs, including human costs, birthing a military enlightenment that sought 'good war'. It is war waged only when necessary, so as not to needlessly deplete resources, especially manpower, and war waged humanely to reflect the compassion, rationality, and dignity of the human race. These were the ideas that emerged with the Enlightenment.[33]

Just as concern for humanity did not make the 18th-century European states stop being fiscal-military states, the *Arthaśāstra*'s emphasis on holistic societal development beyond sole military activity does not mean its envisioned state was not a fiscal-military one.

Magadha and its Contemporaries as Fiscal-Military States

One aspect of European fiscal-military states was that the armies they raised were often used for imperialistic purposes and capturing overseas colonial possessions, whereas such considerations play no role in the *Arthaśāstra*. This is especially true of the earliest fiscal-military states such as Spain and the Netherlands, and then Britain. Their fascination with overseas 'imperialism' was engendered by developments in maritime and navigational technology (charts, compasses, tall-ships and more), their position on the Atlantic seaboard, and their internal conditions that made overseas ventures attractive. Not all contemporaneous fiscal-military states were equally invested in overseas colonial activity, often preferring to direct their military energies within the continent, quite like the *janapada*s.

Two reasons which made colonial ventures possible were the state's monopoly over violence internally, and the mutually recognised inviolate sovereignty that had emerged out of the Westphalian peace, which made them secure externally. It was in this latter idea of sovereignty that the backdrop of the *Arthaśāstra*-envisioned state differed. Several *janapada*s, all of them early fiscal-military states which had arranged their internal processes to maintain armies and were also encouraging human resources development, were—unlike Europe more than a millennium later—still contesting for a run of the *Cakravartī-kṣetra*.[ai]

Despite a sense of cultural unity within this region, rivalries made political integration difficult, leading to diverse aspirant *vijīgiṣu*s (state leaders) fighting endlessly for domination, ignoring all notions of regional sovereignty. While such conflict included the ubiquitous clash of contesting armies, it also comprised revenue collection missions and provisioning expeditions into distant regions, as well as raids into the forest realms of *Āṭavika* chiefs. A major feature of distant raids was the collection of elephants, especially war elephants for the sustenance and strengthening of the militaries.

ai The expanse of India between the Himalayas and the seas. See: *Artha.*, X.1.17–18.

The scattered evidence gleaned from largely literary sources indicates that the *Arthaśāstra* was not a mere theoretical exercise but represented the political economy of the middle and eastern Gangetic plains from the 6th century BCE to the 4th century CE. It shows that the tradition of state building, best represented in Magadha, corresponds well to the definition of the fiscal-military state, albeit with significant differences from the type of states that have been given this descriptor in later times. It should also be noted that Magadha was not unique, and several realms of the mature Iron Age world—China, Rome, Greece, or Persia—also demonstrated state formation with institutionalised, meritocratic governance and professionalised armies, though the results were not the same everywhere.

It is not possible to examine everything that happened everywhere at all times in one paper, though it would be a good exercise to analyse each of these polities to see which of them qualify as fiscal-military states, and whose armies were professional to what degree. Only the case of Rome is briefly examined here for comparison, to highlight the uniqueness of the Indian experience. The Roman army at the beginning of the Republic was not professional[aj] but was made up of grades of land-owning classes who saw military service as their social duty and privilege.[34] It was professionalised by the consul Gaius Marius, whose reforms in 104 BCE (coeval with the Jugurtha war[ak]) opened its membership to the *capite censi*, the vast class of landless poor. This army performed well under Marius, but also ultimately led to the dictatorships of Sulla and then Caesar, both of whom played on its loyalties with promises of plunder and provision of land assignment as retirement settlements (as Marius's reforms had promised).[35] Such dictatorships were not entirely unexpected, and may be seen as weak emergent properties of the complex Roman system.

While the clash of the *caturaṅga* was the quintessential mode of conflict among the established *janapada*s, all of them, including Magadha, also faced occasional attacks by tides of cavalry from the arid west, often of Central Asian origin. The Śaka, the Pahlava, or the later Greek expeditions tended for some time to use Mathura as a base; Magadha's contest with

aj 'Professional' would mean democratically recruited and centrally paid.

ak The battles between the Roman Empire and King Jugurtha of Numidia, a kingdom on the North African coast between 112 and 106 BCE.

these forces is seen in Samudragupta's campaigns against the Nāgas, Vikramaditya's relocating to Ujjain to fight the Scythians on the west coast, and Skandagupta's campaigns against the early Hūṇas. The collapse of Magadhan power in the mid-5th century CE was coincident with a renewed surge of Hūṇa cavalries, when the centre of political gravity of North India again swung to the west. For the next few centuries, Kannauj, rather than Magadha, became the 'imperial' seat of India.

The kingdoms and polities that appeared through the next millennium till the advent of English rule were fundamentally different from the *Arthaśāstra* ideal. While the Magadhan kings were not personal proprietors but really officiants, later state rulers were increasingly personal or clannish. Harsha's[al] or the Satavahana dynasty's[am] courts were of the 'nomad-camp-capital' kind. The transformation was complete by the Turco-Mughal period, when states became no more than personal fiefdoms, their nobles only using them to further their personal power and sponsor conspicuous consumption of their supporting elite.

Often emerging as implicit consensus among nobles with armies, these states remained predatory and parasitic, paying no attention to moral and material improvement of the people, tending to disintegrate almost as soon as their owner-prince died, unless another prince immediately grabbed the crown. Bahadur Shah's kingdom in Gujarat evaporated the moment he was accidentally killed while visiting the Portuguese at Damañ; the Mughal throne was fought over by all brothers every time its emperor died (in Tëmurid families, all brothers had equal claims to their father's throne, a major deviation from the Mongol *junior right*[an]); to inherit the kingdom of Mysore, Tipu had to rush to the Coromandel at the death of his father Hyder Ali (who had been campaigning there) before the state could disintegrate.

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al Harsha, or Harshavardhana, ruled from 606 to 647 CE, with Kannauj as his capital.

am The Satavahana dynasty ruled from the 2nd century BCE to the early 3rd century CE. Their kingdom largely comprised present-day Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Maharashtra.

an As per Mongol 'junior rights', the elder sons inherited distant conquests, with the eldest son receiving the farthest and the youngest receiving the father's homeland. Thus, while his eldest line (his son Jochi had predeceased him) received the farthest regions around Moscow (later the Golden Horde), the homeland was received by his youngest son Tolui, while the title of the Grand Khan was given to Ogedei, his third son. Tolui's elder sons—Mongke, Hulegu, and Kublai—inherited distant conquests, while the junior, Ariq Boke, inherited the Mongol home and hearth.

Most nobles and officials too, held appointments as royal acknowledgement, not of their merit or ability, but of the power and influence they already possessed. Central authorities also reassigned appointments arbitrarily, so that no single noble/official became too powerful; designates and incumbents often needed to fight off predecessors and successors. Consequently, many of these men made the most of their appointments while they lasted. The governor of Surat, for example, did his best to fleece any European who wanted to meet the Mughal emperor, trying to extract as much of the *nazr* (gifts) as he could before letting the visitor proceed.[36] Not familiar with the concept of institutionalisation or civic inheritance, the lords of the realm, themselves forever ready to behave 'treacherously' with no stigma, never quite understood why English or French generals and governors could not be tempted to switch allegiance at their behest, and put their rebuffs down to arrogance. They did not comprehend why the French India governor Pierre Dumas, while handing over charge to his successor Joseph Dupleix, also handed him his title of Mughal *mansabdar*.[37]

Another strand of state-formation can be traced through the career of Indian infantry. *Caturaṅga*s of the Iron Age *janapada*s could prevail over smaller versions of themselves, but were too humongous to be effective when attacked by more supple forces, including cavalries. Once the *caturaṅga* fell victim to its own gigantism,[38] the vast supplies of infantry it had harnessed were now employed by the lords of Chanderi, Orchha, Datiya, or Panna in the fastnesses of Central India, creating a tradition of serving in militaries far away from the soldier's home region.[39]

The rulers of these principalities preferred to remain powerful colonel-commandants, not declaring sovereignty themselves but using their large infantry contingents to play kingmaker in many a period sultanate till their power was broken by the early Mughal emperors and Sher Shah Suri.[ao] The infantry was now available under humbler jobber-commanders to the Mughals, to other regional powers, and even to the nascent European

ao Sher Shah Suri began as ruler of Bihar in 1530 and defeated Mughal emperor Humayun in 1538 to become emperor himself.

outposts as *telingas* and *sepoys*.[40] It was these infantries that later manned the ranks of the East India Company's (EIC) *sepoy* battalions, which were used to create what can be called a fiscal-military state.[ap]

The initial version of the EIC state, created following the *Dual Rule* formula established after the Battle of Buxar in 1765,[aq] met the narrowest possible definition of the fiscal-military state. The EIC established a voracious taxation system and took over military responsibilities, leaving civic administration and government to the Nawab. But once *Dual Rule* was discarded in 1772, other features of the fiscal-military state started appearing. The EIC's standing, professional armies remained in the field for long durations, with the EIC refusing to acknowledge regional sovereignties; this was clearly seen when Governor General Warren Hastings passed orders for armies from Bengal to march through territories of other kings towards Bombay (now Mumbai) to provide reinforcements during the First Maratha War (1775-1782).[ar] EIC rule was supported by an extractive, accurate, but increasingly fair revenue system, and also created an impersonal, institutionalised meritocratic administration, which demilitarised the countryside, and also acted as a vehicle for social improvement.

As it happened, it was this zeal to promote social improvement, increasingly marked by arrogance and scornful evangelism, which backfired, leading to the Indian uprising of 1857. The format of authority that replaced EIC rule after 1858, when the British Crown took over the administration, was markedly different on two counts. The army was not required to remain continually in the field (except for short periods called for by the 'Great Game' beyond Indian frontiers), and the push for social improvement was largely abandoned.

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ap This may not be a legally precise definition. Though the financial responsibilities of the EIC had been progressively reduced by the various India Acts and the Charter Acts till it was only vestigial, it still was a 'commercial company' that may not qualify as a Westphalian state.

aq The Battle of Buxar was fought in October 1764 between the EIC troops and three local rulers—Mir Qasim Ali of Bengal, Shuja ud Daula of Avadh (Oudh), and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. The defeat of the alliance led to the Treaty of Allahabad and the establishment of the 'Dual Rule' in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, giving the EIC exclusive rights to collect revenue in this region, while the administration was still handled by the local rulers. Dual Rule was abolished by Governor General Warren Hastings in 1772.

ar EIC armies avoided marching through the Punjab during the First Afghan War—not out of respect for Punjab's sovereignty, but fear.

This *longue durée* examination shows that the institutionalised, meritocratic, and reformative rule introduced by the EIC was not unique but had a strong homegrown precedent in India, its nature represented in the *Arthaśāstra*. The *Arthaśāstra* was not merely a compilation of wishful thinking, but enjoined a method of providing a positive path for the people of a region, which was much more than the mere recommendations of scheming machinations that the text is usually associated with. However, so that no hasty conclusions are arrived at, it would be an interesting exercise to empirically improve the current state of data so that other period kingdoms, such as those of Kosala, Ujjain, and Toṣālī can be examined in detail. It would also be worth examining the close relationship of these Iron Age polities with the spiritual and intellectual turmoil of what the German philosopher Karl Jasper has called the 'Axial Age' (8th to 3rd centuries BCE), which set off a remarkable trend of humanism in Eurasian societies that would have impacted the contemporary debate on state formation.[41]

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