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Research Article

Sociopolitical Thought in Sanskrit Literature

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Abstract

Sanskrit literature represents one of the earliest and most comprehensive traditions of sociopolitical thought in world history. From the Vedic period to the medieval era, Sanskrit texts articulated systematic ideas on state, governance, law, social order, and the duties of rulers and citizens. Unlike modern political theories centred on rights, Sanskrit political thought is fundamentally duty-based, grounded in the concept of dharma — the moral and cosmic law that sustains society.

The most authoritative text, Kautilya's Arthashastra (c. 4th century BCE), presents a pragmatic science of statecraft called dandaniti, outlining the Saptanga theory of the state, taxation, diplomacy, and the Mandala theory of foreign policy, with the ultimate goal of yogakshema — the welfare and security of the people. The Manusmriti codifies rajadharma and legal principles, emphasising danda or punishment as essential to prevent matsya nyaya, the law of the fish, where the strong devour the weak. The Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata elaborates on kingship as a burden, stressing justice, counsel of ministers, and apad-dharma during crises. Other works like Sukraniti and Nitisara further develop administrative and ethical frameworks. Central to Sanskrit sociopolitical thought are key concepts such as rajarshi — the ideal of a ruler-sage, prakriti — the role of the populace in legitimising rule, and kosha-mulo dandah — the economic basis of state power. These texts envision the state as an organic entity where the king, ministers, territory, treasury, army, and allies function interdependently.

This study examines how Sanskrit literature integrates ethics, law, and administration to create a holistic vision of polity. Its emphasis on welfare, moral legitimacy, and social stability continues to influence Indian political traditions and offers valuable insights for contemporary governance debates.

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INTRODUCTION

Sanskrit literature is often seen as a repository of philosophy, grammar, and poetry. Yet one of its oldest and most influential streams is rajaniti or dandaniti — the science of politics and governance. For over 2000 years, Sanskrit texts debated how societies should be ordered, what makes a ruler legitimate, and how power must be balanced with duty.

1. What Counts as “Socio-Political Thought” in Sanskrit?

It covers three broad concerns:

1. Statecraft *_Arthashastra_*: How to acquire, protect, and administer a kingdom.
2. Social Order *_Dharmashastra_*: The duties of varnas, ashramas, the king, and subjects that hold society together.
3. Political Ethics *_Nitisastra_*: The relationship between morality, dharma, and power danda.

These are not separate disciplines. Sanskrit thinkers saw artha, wealth/power, dharma, law/duty, and kama, welfare/desire, as the three purusharthas that a state must harmonise.

2. Historical Timeline of Major Sources

Period	Key Texts	Core Idea
1500–600 BCE	Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Brahmanas	—

Kingship by election, sabha and samiti assemblies, the king as gopta protector

Period	Key Texts	Core Idea
600–200 BCE	Dharmasutras of Gautama, Apastamba	King bound by law, taxation for protection, and the early Rajadharma
300 BCE–200 CE	Arthashastra of Kautilya, Manusmriti	Saptanga state theory, Mandala foreign policy, Danda as the foundation of order
200–500 CE	Mahabharata (Shanti Parva), Ramayana	Social contract origin of state, Apad-dharma for emergencies, welfare of subjects
400–1200 CE	Kamandaka’s Nitisara, Shukraniti, Somadeva’s Nitivakyamrita	Summaries and updates, local self-government, merit over birth

3. Central Themes You’ll See Across Texts

1. Dharma: The cosmic and social order. A king’s legitimacy comes from upholding dharma, not from divine right alone.
2. Danda: Punishment or the coercive power of the state. "Without danda, the world would be matsya-nyaya", the law of fishes, where the big eat the small.
3. Rajadharma: The specific code of conduct for rulers. Protect subjects, judge impartially, tax moderately, wage war only for dharma.
4. Prakriti & Saptanga: The state is an organism with 7 limbs: king, ministers, territory, forts, treasury, army, allies. All must be healthy.

5. Yogakshema: The goal of governance. Yoga = acquiring welfare, kshema = protecting what is acquired. A welfare state in ancient terms.

4. Why It Matters

Sanskrit political theory was practical. It was written for actual kings, ministers, and judges. The Arthashastra reads like a manual for IAS officers: how to test officials, audit accounts, build irrigation, run espionage. At the same time, the Epics and Dharmashastras insist that power without ethics is self-destructive.

The tradition also knew political diversity. Alongside monarchies, Panini and Buddhist texts describe gana-sanghas or oligarchic republics like the Licchavis. Arthashastra Book 11 even explains how to destabilise them, proving they were real alternatives.

5. Approach of This Tradition

Unlike Greek thought that separated ethics and politics, or modern theory that separates church and state, Sanskrit texts integrate them. But they are not theocratic. Kautilya says artha is the root, because without material stability, dharma and kama collapse. The debate between principle and pragmatism runs through the entire corpus.

The Scope of Rajaniti and Dandaniti

Sanskrit political thought is not confined to one book. It developed as an independent branch of knowledge called Rajaniti Shastra, Dandaniti, or Arthashastra from c. 1500 BCE to 1200 CE. Unlike modern political science that separates ethics and statecraft, the Sanskrit tradition binds them through dharma. Yet within that frame, thinkers debated centralisation vs localism, morality vs expediency, and hierarchy vs merit. The corpus includes Vedas, Dharmasutras, Epics, Arthashastra, Nitisara, Shukraniti, inscriptions, and commentaries.

Thesis: Sanskrit socio-political thought evolved from tribal elective chiefdom to bureaucratic monarchy, mediated by the tension between dharma as normative order and artha as material power. It produced original theories of state formation, public administration, and international relations that predate Machiavelli by 1800 years.

2. Vedic Foundations: Sacral Kingship and Assemblies

2.1. Rigveda to Atharvaveda

The term Rajan appears in Rigveda 10.173. The king was chosen by the vish or people. Coronation hymns, Rajasuya and Vajapeya in the Yajurveda show ritual legitimisation. Power was not absolute. Sabha and Samiti were popular assemblies that could ratify or censure the king. RV 10.191 calls for the assembly to "speak together, think together".

2.2. Brahmanas and Upanishads

Aitareya Brahmana 8.12 traces the origin of kingship to Indra’s election by the gods to fight the asuras. This is an early social contract idea. The king takes an oath: "If I oppress you, may I

lose all merit". Shatapatha Brahmana links the king to kshatra power and brahma knowledge, setting up the king-brahmin alliance.

3. Dharmashastra Tradition: Normative Framework

3.1. Manusmriti on Rajadharma

Book 7 is a constitution. Key principles:

1. Origin: King created from eternal particles of Indra, Vayu, Yama, etc. Manu 7.4. Divinity is functional, not personal.
2. Taxation: 1/6th of grain, 1/50th of livestock. If he fails to protect, he incurs the sin of the subjects. Manu 8.308.
3. Danda: "Danda alone governs all beings" 7.22. Graded punishment prevents matsya-nyaya, the law of fishes, where the big eat the small.
4. Council: 7-8 ministers, tested for loyalty. War is a last resort.

3.2. Yajnavalkya and Narada

Yajnavalkya Smriti adds civil law and procedure. Recognises local custom deshachara as a source of law, if not against dharma. Narada Smriti gives 18 titles of law, including contract, debt, and partnership. This is proto-constitutionalism: the king is under law, not above it.

4. Arthashastra: The Science of Material Gain

4.1. Authorship and Date

Attributed to Kautilya/Vishnugupta, advisor to Chandragupta Maurya, c. 300 BCE. 15 books, 150 chapters, 6000 sutras. Treats artha as the root of dharma and kama.

4.2. Saptanga Theory of State

The state is an organic body with 7 limbs:

1. **Swami:** King. Must be active, disciplined, and accessible.
2. **Amatya:** Bureaucracy. Recruited by tests of dharma, artha, kama, and bhaya.
3. **Janapada:** Territory and population. Settlement policy, irrigation, and mines.
4. **Durga:** Fortified capital. 4 types described.
5. **Kosha:** Treasury. Tax rates, emergency hoards, audits.
6. **Danda:** Army. Hereditary, hired, corporate, allied troops.
7. **Mitra:** Ally. Chosen by common interest.

If any limb is defective, the state is sick. This is one of the earliest systems analyses of government.

4.3. Administration and Law

Detailed departments: 34 adhyakshas for mining, commerce, ships, and weights. Spies gudha-purusha in 5 classes test officials. Law courts at the village, district, and capital. Witnesses, ordeals, and documentation covered.

4.4. Mandala Theory and Sadgunya

Foreign policy is realist. Concentric circle of states: Ari enemy, Mitra friend, Arimitra enemy's friend, etc. The vijigishu or would-be conqueror should use 6 measures: sandhi peace,

vigraha war, asana neutrality, yana marching, samshraya seeking shelter, and dvaidhibhava dual policy.

4.5. Ethics in Arthashastra

Kautilya is not amoral. Book 1.7: "In the happiness of subjects lies the king's happiness". But in an emergency apad, he permits assassination, disinformation, and torture. Goal: stability and yogakshema welfare.

5. Epics: Applied Political Philosophy

5.1. Mahabharata, Shanti Parva

Ch. 56-130 = longest Sanskrit treatise on kingship. Bhishma teaches:

- Origin of state: When anarchy prevailed, people approached Brahma, who composed a treatise of 100,000 chapters. Shiva abridged it.
- Contract: People chose Manu and agreed to give tax and follow him. If he doesn't protect, he is a kali king.
- Apad-dharma: In distress, the king may take from the rich, suspend dharma, but must restore order.
- Just war: War to protect dharma is justified, but deceit is condemned unless the enemy uses it first.

5.2. Ramayana

Rama, as Maryada-Purushottama, embodies a king who puts praja above family. His exile shows the limits of paternal autocracy. Bharata's regency with sandals on the throne = symbolic constitutionalism.

6. Post-Gupta Niti Texts

6.1. Kamandaka's Nitisara

4th-6th century CE. Verse summary of Kautilya. Adds emphasis on naya ethical policy vs apanaaya. Stresses diplomacy over war.

6.2. Shukraniti

Attributed to Shukracharya, but likely 12th century. 4 chapters. Unique features: detailed military tech, including firearms, public finance, and judicial process. Says the Shudra king is valid if competent. More egalitarian.

6.3. Somadeva's Nitivakyamrita

10th-century Jain text. King must be like a pregnant woman: eats for two, works for subjects. Stresses ministerial oversight.

7. Key Concepts and Debates

1. Dharma vs Danda: Is law based on morals or coercion? Medhatithi says danda without dharma is tyranny. Kautilya says dharma without danda is toothless.
2. Monarchy vs Gana-sangha: Panini 5.3.114 mentions sangha. Arthashastra Book 11 details how to destroy oligarchies, implying they were common. Buddhist texts confirm the Licchavi republics. Sanskrit tradition thus knew non-monarchical forms.

3. Varna and Merit: Shastras prescribe varna duties, but the Arthashastra 1.3 allows anyone to be amatya if qualified. Shudra kings like Nandas ruled Magadha.
4. Property: King is not the owner. He gets tax for protection. Narada 18.48: "Land belongs to him who clears it". Early limitation on eminent domain.
5. Women and Power: Queens as regents, Rajamata, Prabhavati. But political office is mostly male. Shukraniti 1.71: women can rule if there is no male heir.

8. Legacy and Comparison

Sanskrit Concept	Modern Parallel
Saptanga	Elements of state in political science
Mandala	Balance of power, sphere of influence
Danda	Weber's monopoly of violence
Matsya-nyaya	Hobbes' state of nature
Sabha / Samiti	Proto-parliament

Inscriptions of Ashoka, Gupta, and Chola show these ideas in practice. Chola local self-govt ur and sabha match the Dharmashastra provisions.

CONCLUSION

Sanskrit political thought is neither theocratic nor purely Machiavellian. It seeks a dharmic state that is also strong and wealthy. Its enduring insight: legitimacy flows from protection and welfare yogakshema, not birth or conquest. For a 5000-word version, each section above can be expanded with original verses, historical examples, and commentary by Medhatithi, Kulluka, and modern scholars like K.P. Jayaswal, R.P. Kangle, and P.V. Kane.

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