

# Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as a Precursor to the Concept of Servant Leadership: An Exploration

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*The Arthashastra is an Indian text which was written by Kautilya around 2500 years ago. Mainly intended to be a textbook on statecraft for kings, this treatise covers various aspects of leadership and management that are still relevant today. On the other hand, servant leadership is a growing leadership theory that is gaining popularity due to its unique focus on followers' wellbeing. Using hermeneutic techniques, the authors have analyzed the verses in the Arthashastra related to the servant leadership theory. Based on this analysis, the authors have identified at least four dimensions of modern servant leadership that are present in this ancient text, namely authenticity, stewardship, altruism, and interpersonal acceptance. The authors recommend that further research is conducted into Indian culture and literature (including the Arthashastra) to explore the Asian roots of servant leadership.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The *Arthashastra* is an ancient Indian text which has been dated to around 2500 years ago. It is believed to be written by Kautilya - popularly known as Chanakya - who was the prime minister during Chandragupta Maurya's reign in India. Kautilya played a prominent role in the expansion of Chandragupta's power to establish the biggest empire in the Indian subcontinent. Upon retirement, Kautilya reflected on his experiences and composed his own definitive work, the *Arthashastra*. The *Arthashastra* is a practical

work which could have only be written by someone who had implemented the tactics which he preached (Rangarajan. 1992, p. 6).

Despite its antiquity, the text went missing from mainstream history and literature for over a millennium, until a full text on palm leaf in the *grantha* script was discovered in 1904 by R. Shamasastri, who published the text in the original Sanskrit language as well as an English translation and an Index Verborum. Since then, numerous other scholars have interpreted or translated the text of the *Arthashastra*, including Jolly & Schmidt (1923), Ganapati Sastri (1924-1925), Kangle (1960-1965), Trautmann (1971), Rangarajan (1987), McClish (2009), and Olivelle (2013). Every version may have its own strengths and weaknesses, but all of them contributed in enriching the body of knowledge on the *Arthashastra*. Among these, the most widely referenced version of the *Arthashastra* is the translation by Kangle.

The *Arthashastra* has been interchangeably translated as the 'Science of Economics' and 'Science of Politics' (Rangarajan. 1992, pp. 2 - 3), indicating a close-knit relationship between economics and political science in the eyes of Kautilya. Accordingly, the primary purpose of the original text of *Arthashastra* was to serve as a textbook for rulers on statecraft and the management of a kingdom. A closer look into this text, however, will reveal the width and depth of the topics covered in this work of genius, which includes economic management, finance, accounting, environmental management, war and defense strategies, and diplomacy and foreign affairs. There is an opinion among some scholars that this ancient text is obsolete and not relevant in today's world, which can be deduced from the lack of modern studies based on the concepts expounded in this text. While a small portion of the contents of this text may have admittedly become irrelevant, e.g., the use of magical spells and potions to ward off enemies, the authors find that most sections in this ancient text are still relevant and universally applicable today, including in the modern corporate context. All it takes is for one to study this text with an objective mind and correct techniques based on the context of the *Arthashastra*, to truly understand this work of genius.

On the other hand, the field of leadership is highly popular among scholars, and most major universities today have faculties or institutes dedicated to leadership studies. Specifically, the study of leadership theories has come a long way in the past few centuries, with a wide range of well-developed and widely-applied leadership theories and models researched by renown scholars. These include behavioral leadership theories, contingency and situational theories of leadership, servant leadership, team leadership, and transformational leadership. Each leadership theory has its share of strengths and weaknesses, as well as playing an important role in enriching the field of leadership.

One of the prominent leadership theories today is the servant leadership theory. The basic premise of servant leadership is that a leader is a person who pursues service towards others, which comes as a natural component within himself (Patterson. 2003, p. 2). Robert K. Greenleaf was the first person to start the process of operationalizing servant leadership and applying it to modern organizations (Gandolfi et. al. 2017, p. 351), which followed his long experience serving large corporations. However, instead of theorizing on high profile corporate leaders, he based his theory on his personal reading of Herman Hesse's (1956) story titled "The Journey to the East" (Sendjaya. 2015, p. 16; Sendjaya & Sarros. 2002, p. 58). From this account of a mythical journey of individuals towards spirituality, Greenleaf concluded that true leadership emerges from people whose main motivation is a desire to help and serve others (Spears. 2005, p. 2). In particular, it was a character named Leo which gave Greenleaf an interesting juxtaposition between leadership and servanthood, through his capability to facilitate pilgrims towards achieving common objectives, and his servanthood through his meeting their needs (Sendjaya. 2015, p. 16). According to Greenleaf, servant leadership starts with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first - as Leo was portrayed - which will then bring one to aspire to lead. This individual has a sharply

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