

R. Shamashastry – the scholar who discovered Arthashastra

-B.M.N. Murthy

Till about the dawn of the 20th century there was a misconception in the Western world that everything in ancient India was moved by otherworldly considerations, the society ignorant of statecraft, social affairs and administration. The turning point which removed this misconception, was the discovery of Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' in Sanskrit. Though written 2,400 years earlier, the classic work was discovered as late as the 20th century.

The singular credit for this discovery goes to Dr Rudrapatnam Shamashastry of Mysore who not only discovered the manuscript but heralded a new era in Indian administration and statecraft.

The history of ancient India pertaining to the 4th century BC, shows that it was Kautilya, also known as Vishnugupta or Chanakya, who overthrew the ruling Nanda dynasty and anointed Chandragupta Maurya as the King. Kautilya was a student of the Taxila University (then called Takshashila and now in Pakistan), the very first university to be founded in the world as early as in 700 B.C. He later taught in the same university for about four years.

It was this Kautilya who wrote 'Arthashastra' which is a monumental treatise on administration and civic affairs. This comprehensive work, must have been written some time between 321–296 BC.

It is a practical guide not only on running governmental organisations but also a work that deals with duties of Kings, Ministers, local officials, methods of diplomacy etc including ways and means of defeating an enemy. Encyclopedic in its coverage many scholars have wondered how one head could carry such a vast knowledge.

Among the libraries and research institutions in the country which preserve rare palm leaf manuscripts, the Mysore Oriental Library (now called the Oriental Research Institute) is well-known.

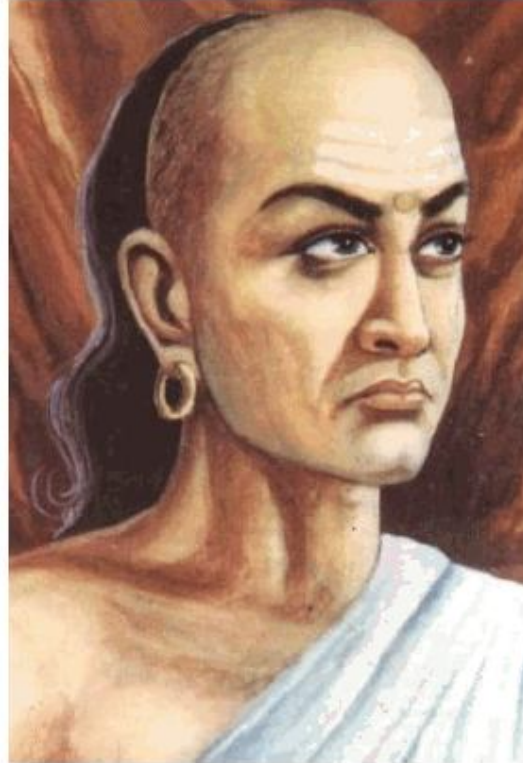


In 1891 the then Maharaja of Mysore State wanted to celebrate the golden jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen Victoria's accession to the British throne in a grand style and got a beautiful building built with a blend of classical architectural styles and named it Victoria Jubilee Institute. This is the same building in which the Oriental Library has been functioning for more than a century. It was here that the manuscript of Kautilya's Arthashastra was first discovered.

This library had a librarian named Rudrapatnam Shamashastry during 1905. Shastry hailed from a place known as Rudrapatnam on the banks of River Kaveri and was born in a Sankethi Brahmin family and in a community known for Vedic learning.

Even at a young age, Shastry showed a remarkable skill in learning the Vedas, the Upanishads and other sacred lore. Before he was forty, he had mastered most of the Vedas, the Vedangas, Classical Sanskrit, German, French and a few more foreign languages.

In addition, he had learnt how to decipher several Oriental scripts. Shastry was a devoted and sincere librarian in the Oriental Library. Even though the job of dealing with ancient manuscripts, most of which in torn conditions and quite dusty, was difficult, risky and monotonous, he was dedicated to his job and took pleasure in his work. One day, sometime in 1905, he picked up some palm leaf manuscripts and on keen examination, was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was 'Arthashastra' of Kautilya. Examining it from several angles, Shastry was convinced that it was a genuine work of Kautilya.



In his introduction to the book written in 1909, Shastry says that he was convinced beyond doubt that Kautilya's genuine work was a literary classic of the ancient world. It did not take long for the discovery to get publicity. Rudrapatnam Shamashastry became a celebrity. Scholars and academicians the world over started congratulating him for having ushered in a new era in Indian administration and statecraft by discovering Kautilya's masterpiece. Eminent educationists and historians of the day literally vied with each other in inviting Shamashastry to their universities, honouring him and getting the benefit of the new discovery.

Shamashastry met Mahatma Gandhi in 1927 when he was camping at the Nandi Hills and presented him with a copy of 'Arthashastra'. Gandhiji was immensely pleased with his rare contribution to Indian polity and congratulated him. Rabindranath Tagore was all

praise for the new discovery. The Washington University awarded a Doctorate to Shastry and the Royal Asiatic Society its Fellowship. The Government of India gave him the title 'Mahamahopadhyaya', a rare and coveted honour to an Oriental scholar.

Dr Asutosh Mukherji, the renowned educationist of the 20th century and five times Vice Chancellor of the Calcutta University, invited Shamashastry to deliver a series of ten lectures in 1919 under the auspices of the Calcutta University. These lectures under the title 'Evolution of Indian Polity,' were subsequently published in Mysore under the title, 'Kautilya's Arthashastra', with an introduction by British Historian J.F. Fleet. Fleet says: "We are, and shall always remain, under a great obligation to Shamashastry for the most important addition to our means of studying the General History of ancient India".

The Maharaja of Mysore once visited Germany for delivering a talk at the invitation of a German institution. After the lecture, a German gentleman approached His Highness and asked "Your Majesty, are you the Maharaja of Mysore where lives Dr Shamashastry, the discoverer of Arthashastra?" The Maharaja was pleasantly pleased that one of his own subjects was well-known in far off Germany.

On his return, he sent for Dr Shamashastry and said: "In Mysore State we are the Maharaja and you are the subject. But in Germany, you are the Master and people recognise us by Your name and fame". The Maharaja awarded him with the title, "Arthashastra Visharada' during the Dasara celebrations of 1926.

Shamashastry who passed away in 1944 was an extremely simple man with deep religious habits. Humility was his hallmark and he was always ready to help youngsters to come up in life. Western scholars had always argued that ancient India had learnt the art of administration from the Greeks ever since they came into contact with Greeks with the invasion of Alexander. But Shamashastry had proved them all wrong with his discovery of Arthashastra and showed how even the British had adopted some of the features contained in the treatise for their administration.

The Centenary Year of the publication of Kautilya's Arthashastra was observed in 2009.

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