



Leadership Lessons from Kautilya's Arthashastra: Developing A Contemporary Leadership Model for Indian Armed Forces

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Abstract

Kautilya's Arthashastra is well-known for its strategic and statecraft teachings. The treatise also offers a nuanced philosophy of leadership that extends far beyond mere military tactics. This research paper undertakes a critical examination of Kautilya's Arthashastra to extract its core leadership tenets and assess their applicability for developing a contemporary leadership model for Indian Armed Forces. The research focusses on three primary objectives: to identify the specific leadership qualities enunciated by Kautilya, to evaluate their relevance in the twenty-first century, and to determine the feasibility of constructing a leadership model for the training of future Indian military leaders based on these principles.

The study uses qualitative content analysis to identify leadership qualities from the primary text and compares them with modern leadership theories and current security issues to assess their ongoing relevance. The findings demonstrate that the Arthashastra offers a robust, indigenous approach to leadership—emphasizing ethical integrity, decisiveness, intellectual insight, and the welfare of subordinates—qualities that are still relevant today. Consequently, this paper proposes a structured leadership model derived from these qualities, designed for integration into the training and pedagogical curriculum of future Indian Armed Forces officers.

The research concludes that the leadership qualities described in the Arthashastra are still crucial today and can be effectively used for developing leaders who are prepared to deal with the difficult moral and strategic problems of modern warfare.

Keywords: military leadership, statecraft, strategic culture, ethical integrity, intuitive thinking

INTRODUCTION

The security challenges that India faces today are more complex than ever. The need for strong and wise leaders in the Indian Armed Forces is more acute than ever. While the usefulness of modern leadership theories cannot be discounted, there is a strong need for an approach that is deeply connected to India's own rich history and strategic culture. Kautilya's Arthashastra offers exactly this kind of timeless wisdom. The book is an ancient masterpiece on statecraft. The book is not just about strategy. It offers a deep and thoughtful worldview



of leadership that is built on ethics, intelligence, strong decision-making, and genuine care for the people. This paper explores the Arthashastra to identify its key leadership lessons. It tests the relevance of these leadership tenets for our modern times, and uses them to build a practical leadership model for training the next generation of Armed Forces officers in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the available scholarly literature on Kautilya's Arthashastra has been carried out in three related areas: studying the text as a treatise on statecraft, analyzing it from the viewpoint of management and leadership, and looking at leadership styles that are rooted in Indian traditions which may be suited to the Indian Armed Forces.

The first stream of literature outlines the underlying principles of the Arthashastra. Translations and commentaries by authors like (Rangarajan, 1992) and (Kangle, 1965) have helped in making the Arthashastra accessible to present-day readers. Their works focus on the Arthashastra as a manual on running the state. Scholars like Boesche have analyzed its strategic depth further, and have compared Kautilya to Machiavelli. (Boesche, 2003) argues that Kautilya's vision is far more methodical and encompassing than that of Machiavelli. This stream of literature confirms that the Arthashastra provides a detailed framework for the conduct of a ruler. Qualities such as intellectual competence, energy, and personal discipline form the bedrock of its leadership philosophy (Rangarajan, 1992; and Ganesh & Sharma, 2000).

The second stream of literature links ancient concepts with contemporary management theory. (Sihag, 2004) and (Aier, 2014) have identified parallels between Kautilyan ideas and current philosophies of leadership and management. They note that the Arthashastra contains concepts which are similar to strategic leadership, transformational leadership, and ethical leadership. The importance given in the Arthashastra to the welfare of the population (*Yogakshema*) has been compared to servant leadership and stakeholder theory (Aier, 2014; and Pillai, 2019). Various studies have also observed that Kautilyan viewpoints on crisis management, decision-making, and the selection of ministers, have striking similarities with practices in corporate governance and public administration (Sihag, 2004; and Rao, 2013).

The third stream of literature looks at leadership in the Indian Armed Forces and the study of indigenous leadership models. Official doctrines and works by military scholars highlight the unique demands of military leadership, where decisions have immediate and grave consequences (Bakshi, 2002). The current leadership model of the Indian Armed Forces draws from both colonial traditions and post-independence experiences. However, a gap is felt in formally integrating ancient Indian strategic thought into the training framework of the Armed Forces (Chakravorty, 2006). (Katal, 2025) highlights the need for the development of a leadership model that is culturally grounded and reflects the traditional Indian strategic thought. The works of (Kamal, 2018) and (Bakshi, 2024) bring out Kautilya's emphasis on moral integrity, and the well-being of the army (*Bala*). This stream of literature provides a rich foundation for shaping a contemporary leadership model for the Indian Armed Forces.

Research Gap and Contribution

Although there is a lot of research on the Arthashastra and leadership, most studies focus on separate areas and do not connect them. There are very few works that examine how the leadership lessons from the Arthashastra can apply to today's military needs. There is even fewer literature which puts together these leadership tenets in a practical way for training Indian Armed Forces officers. This study aims to fill that gap. It also responds to the need for leadership models which are rooted in Indian tradition. By bringing these different areas together, this paper seeks to create a leadership framework based on Kautilya's ideas that is suited to the modern Indian Armed Forces.



METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and text-based research methodology. The leadership principles articulated in Kautilya's Arthashastra have been systematically taken from the text, and then analyzed. The research methodology is structured into three sequential phases to maintain depth and relevance.

In the first phase, a comprehensive inventory of Kautilya's leadership concepts was made after carrying out a thorough reading of the text. The analysis relied primarily on L.N. Rangarajan's 1992 translation, 'Kautilya: The Arthashastra' as the primary source. Passages, verses, and anecdotes in the text that deal with the duties, virtues, and conduct of leaders were carefully identified. These qualities were then grouped into different thematic groups and further analyzed.

In the second phase, the contemporary relevance of the leadership tenets enunciated in the Arthashastra was analyzed. It was examined how these ancient tenets apply in relation to modern security challenges. The practical usefulness of these ancient principles in addressing the dilemmas faced by current leaders was also assessed.

In the final phase, the inputs gained from the earlier phases were collated. It was attempted to build a military leadership model that was practical, actionable, and specifically tailored to the needs of the Indian Armed Forces. The proposed model integrates the leadership principles given in the Arthashastra with the existing professional standards in the Indian Armed Forces. This ensures that the model is in accordance with the fundamental demands of modern military leadership.

CORE LEADERSHIP TENETS IN THE ARTHASHASTRA

Kautilya's Arthashastra, is the oldest and most exhaustive treatise on statecraft. It covers a wide array of issues such as diplomacy, war, peace, intelligence, security, and political economy. The text is in the form of guidelines to a king (ruler) as to how he should govern his state, execute foreign policies and plan and conduct military campaigns. Arthashastra can also be interpreted as a treatise on leadership, as it lays down how a ruler should act. This is reinforced by the fact that the very first chapter of Arthashastra deals with the topic of training of the ruler.

Kautilya speaks about enlightened leadership or *Rajarishi*, which is logically developed in the text. *Rajarishi* is akin to the contemporary concept of scholar warrior prevalent in the Indian Army. Another remarkable feature about Arthashastra is that not only does it mention the qualities that a ruler should have but also covers in detail the aspects of training of a prince and conduct of a king. A ruler or a king is primarily a leader of his people. Accordingly, the core leadership tenets from the Arthashastra have been analysed under two separate parts i.e. qualities of a leader and conduct of a leader.

The numbers in parenthesis relate to the text in Arthashastra. The first number depicts the book number, the second depicts the chapter, and the third number is the sutra.

Qualities of a Leader

The topic of 'Training' is covered in the first chapter of the Arthashastra. Kautilya describes the fundamental qualities of a ruler in sutras (6.1.2) to (6.1.6). He divides them into four categories: intellect, energy, approachability, and personal excellence. Kautilya acknowledges the relevance of a ruler's good ancestry, but he also gives importance to an individual's inherent potential and a sincere desire to learn. In the Arthashastra, Kautilya adopts a comprehensive approach by contending that although some inherent traits may encourage people to be leaders, systematic training is necessary for these traits to develop fully. In the end, Kautilya says that true greatness is determined by talent rather than rank (Jain & Mukherji, 2009).

- **Vidyasamuddesah:** Kautilya considers the acquisition and application of knowledge (*Vidyasamuddesah*) as the most critical aspect of effective leadership. He identifies four essential sciences—philosophy, the Vedas, economics, and political science. He places particular emphasis on



Anviksiki, or critical thinking, which he regards as the foundation for sound judgement and rational action. Philosophy, in his view, illuminates all other fields and guides both duty and conduct. He further categorises philosophical thinking into three ways: rational (*Samkhya*), intuitive (*Yoga*), and empirical (*Lokayata*). According to Kautilya, learning is a disciplined process that begins with a genuine desire to know and continues through careful listening, understanding, reflection, and the rejection of false ideas. He underscores the importance of learning from elders (*Vraddhasamyogah*) as real training takes shape through their guidance and experience. In his view, knowledge allows a leader to act effectively, remain steady in difficult moments, and think, speak, and behave with clarity.

- **Discipline:** Discipline has normally been associated with training with an aim to produce a specific character or pattern of behaviour. It has further been bifurcated into self-discipline and enforced discipline. Normal belief, especially in military, is that enforced discipline can make up for lack of self-discipline. However, Kautilya terms self-discipline as a pre-requisite for an effective leader. Discipline is of two kinds - inborn and acquired. Instruction and training can promote discipline only in a person capable of benefiting from them. Learning imparts discipline only to those who have mental faculties - obedience to a teacher, desire and ability to learn, capacity to retain what is learnt, understanding what is learnt, reflecting on it and finally ability to make inferences by deliberating on the knowledge acquired. Those who are devoid of such mental faculties are not benefited by any amount of training (1.5.3-6). Kautilya, through the above sutras, has linked knowledge with discipline and vice-versa, an association usually not made in the contemporary world. An individual lacking intellect cannot be disciplined and only a disciplined person can benefit from training. Another important aspect which one can reflect upon is that of obedience or inborn discipline. It is this inborn or self-discipline which is most essential for a leader as only this would enable him to acquire knowledge and apply it correctly.

- **Indrayajayah:** Kautilya emphasizes that an ideal leader must practise self-purification and maintain mastery over the senses (*Indrayajayah*). The six senses which Kautilya terms as 'six enemies' are – lust (*Kama*), anger (*Krodha*), greed (*Lobha*), pride (*Māna*), arrogance (*Mada*), and foolhardiness (*Harsha*) (1.6.1). If these tendencies are not checked, they can undermine a leader's judgement and stability. Historical examples cited by Kautilya show the consequences of succumbing to these weaknesses. Kautilya asserts that a leader can effectively exercise control over the senses only through self-discipline and cultivation of the mind.

- **Energy:** According to Arthashastra, bravery, resoluteness, quickness and dexterity are the essential components of energy (6.1.5). A leader's energy, both physical and mental, sets the standard for subordinates. An energetic leader is crucial for achieving and maintaining prosperity. Inactivity, by contrast, leads to decline and missed opportunities. The leader's energy ultimately influences the efficacy of governance.

- **Approachability:** According to Arthashastra, approachability encompasses a number of qualities like intelligence, vitality, respect for elders, piety, truthfulness, reliability, gratitude, tolerance, and diligence. The qualities of an easily approachable leader are 'intelligence and spirit, given to seeing elders, pious, truthful in speech, not breaking his promise, grateful, liberal, of great energy, not dilatory (negligent) with weak neighbouring princes, resolute, not having a mean council (of ministers), and desirous of training' (6.1.3). According to Kautilya, a genuine leader must be accepted and not merely obeyed by the people. He also warns that inaccessibility invariably leads to poor advice and misgovernance. Kautilya also emphasizes the importance of constant self-examination and adherence to justice (*Nyay*) and ethics (*Dharma*).

- **Personal Excellences:** The Arthashastra talks of the 'personal excellences' required of a leader. These personal qualities include courage, memory, intelligence, power of expression, strength, flexibility, imaginative training, and freedom from vice (6.1.6). These traits are reflected in the leader's capabilities and in his dignified interpersonal conduct during routine interactions. The repetition of certain qualities in the text underscores their importance in effective leadership.



Conduct of a Leader

- **Time Management:** In sutra (1.19) of Arthashastra, Kautilya suggests a detailed daily routine for the king. Out of the 24 hours in a day, 10.5 hours are allotted for personal activities, including rest, training, and meditation. This underscores the importance of personal development and preparedness for leadership responsibilities.
- **Communication:** The importance of maintaining open and effective communication channels has been emphasized in the Arthashastra. Clarity, simplicity, and charm in official messaging has been encouraged. The necessity of prompt, clear, and well-composed royal edicts has been adequately brought out.
- **Decision Making:** Kautilya advises against procrastination in decision-making. He advocates timely responses to urgent matters. Instead of depending on fate and superstition, the leader should base his political and administrative decisions on science and rational thinking.
- **Delegation:** The Arthashastra focusses on the importance of delegation and joint decision-making. The ruler can be empowered only through delegation of authority. In order to ensure effective governance, the leader should take collective inputs and respect his subordinates' expert views. Therefore, it is necessary to appoint competent advisers.
- **Participative Leadership:** Kautilya recommends a participative approach to leadership instead of autocratic practices. He recommends discussion with ministers and knowledgeable individuals, and the inclusion of diverse opinions before taking major decisions. He advocates that an optimum number of advisors should be maintained for effective consultation. These advisors should be carefully selected on the basis of their expertise and suitability.
- **Mentoring:** Succession planning and training of future leaders are given significant attention. Kautilya suggests that the heir should undergo rigorous practice in economic, diplomatic, and political domains. He also calls for regular assessment and development of the heir's competencies.
- **Welfare of People:** Kautilya prioritizes public welfare. He insists that the king's happiness and benefit are rooted in those of his subjects. He advocates that punishment should be just and proportionate. Accountability and empathy in governance should be ensured. He asserts that the conduct of the leader directly influences the conduct of the populace.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF KAUTILYAN LEADERSHIP

The Indian Armed Forces, being the protectors of the nation, have to operate in a complex and unstable security environment. Even with the availability of modern technology, the effectiveness of the Armed Forces still depends on the quality of their leadership. In this context, the ancient Indian strategic thought in the Arthashastra offers a leadership framework that is significant and enduring. The ideas in the Arthashastra matter to the Indian military today not only for battlefield tactics but also for providing a broad, strategic, and ethical approach to leadership. These ancient concepts are helpful in addressing the challenges that modern commanders face.

At the heart of Kautilya's philosophy is the concept of the *Rajarshi*, or philosopher-king. For a military leader, this means being an officer who is both a warrior and a wise person. Armed Forces officers are expected to be self-disciplined, intellectually sharp, and able to have control over their emotions like fear, anger, and pride. In modern military terms, this aligns with the need for emotional intelligence and moral courage. An officer leading troops in counter-insurgency operations or on the tense line of control must make careful decisions under extreme pressure. In such situations, a loss of self-control can lead to disastrous outcomes. The contemporary military leader has to be prepared for modern hybrid warfare, which includes physical engagement alongside cyber, information, and psychological operations. Kautilya's focus on continuous learning and a well-rounded education prepares today's officers for such hybrid warfare.



Kautilya's *Saptanga*, or seven limbs, theory of the state provides a clear strategic perspective for military leadership. The seven limbs of the state are the ruler, minister, country, fort, treasury, army, and ally. This theory prompts military commanders to think beyond the immediate battlefield. For example, a Corps Commander needs to understand the relationship among these elements. The political will of the 'ruler' (government), the economic strength of the 'treasury', the diplomatic role of 'allies', and the morale of the 'country' (the public) must all be considered. This inclusive view prevents a narrow tactical outlook and promotes collaboration. It also helps in understanding how military actions are connected with national power. This approach makes the Armed Forces officers strategic assets.

Kautilya's practical approach remains relevant even today. His doctrine of *Matsya Nyaya*, or the law of the fish, is a stark reminder of the ever-present reality of a hostile security environment. This doctrine underscores the need for a strong and alert military. His detailed discussion on *upayas*, or the four policy measures (conciliation, gifts, dissent, and force) provides a useful toolkit for dealing with adversaries. For military leaders, this means recognizing the fact that direct force (*danda*) is just one of the options available to them. The ability to use strategic communication (conciliation or *sama*) or to exploit the enemy's internal divisions (dissension or *bheda*) is crucial in the grey-zone conflicts which are typical of modern warfare.

According to Kautilya's, a ruler's ultimate goal should be *Yogakshema*, or the welfare and security of the state. For the Indian Armed Forces, this emphasizes that their primary purpose is to defend the nation and its people. This ethos, which is similar to the Armed Forces' core value of 'Service Before Self', nurtures a sense of higher duty. It reinforces the idea that the Indian Armed Forces draw their strength from the people, and their actions must always be for the security and prosperity of citizens.

Kautilyan leadership provides the Indian Armed Forces with a homegrown and tested model. It develops officers into strategic, emotionally aware, and ethically grounded *Rajarshis* who can meet the challenges of 21st-century warfare. By tapping into this philosophical tradition, the Indian Armed Forces can equip their leaders with a broader and deeper perspective. This will enable the military officers to enhance their capabilities and become strong and effective defenders of the nation.

PROPOSED LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR THE INDIAN ARMED FORCES

Based on the teachings of Arthashastra, two leadership models for the Indian Armed Forces are recommended. The proposed leadership models are directly derived from the core principles articulated in Kautilya's Arthashastra. The justification for these models is based upon the philosophical principles and practical insights offered by Kautilya about the qualities and behaviour of effective leaders.



The first model (Figure 1) focuses on the essential qualities of a leader. The model is built upon the interrelation of qualities that the Arthashastra regards as indispensable for military leaders. These qualities are intellect, self-discipline, and control over the senses. According to Kautilya, these qualities are not isolated. These traits reinforce and compensate for one another, so that a deficiency in one quality reduces the effectiveness of the others. This triad, when combined with individual personal qualities and a commitment to energy and continuous training, creates a well-rounded and adaptable leader. These qualities reflect the *Rajarshi* ideal, which expects leaders to blend wisdom, ethical behavior, and practical skill. This model is especially important for Armed Forces officers working in complex and high-pressure situations.

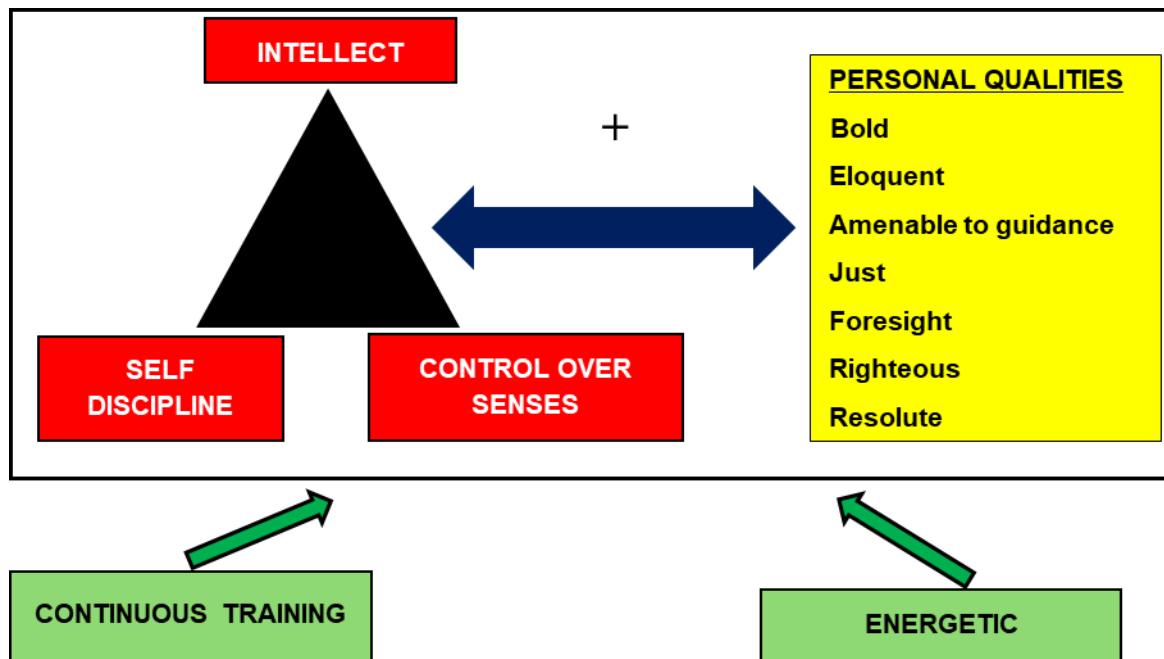


Figure 1: Qualities of a Leader

The second model (Figure 2) outlines the conduct of a leader, and is a logical extension of the first model. It translates the fundamental leadership qualities into effective action. The model emphasizes communication, approachability, delegation, participative decision-making, and time management. These operational behaviours are rooted in Arthashastra's support for ethical, accountable, and strategic leadership. The model emphasizes that leadership qualities matter only when they are actually put into practice. This is especially true in situations where leaders must balance people's welfare with organizational goals. It encourages participation and stresses the importance of fair and effective decision-making. By doing so, it helps leaders to build trust, adaptability and unity within the organization.

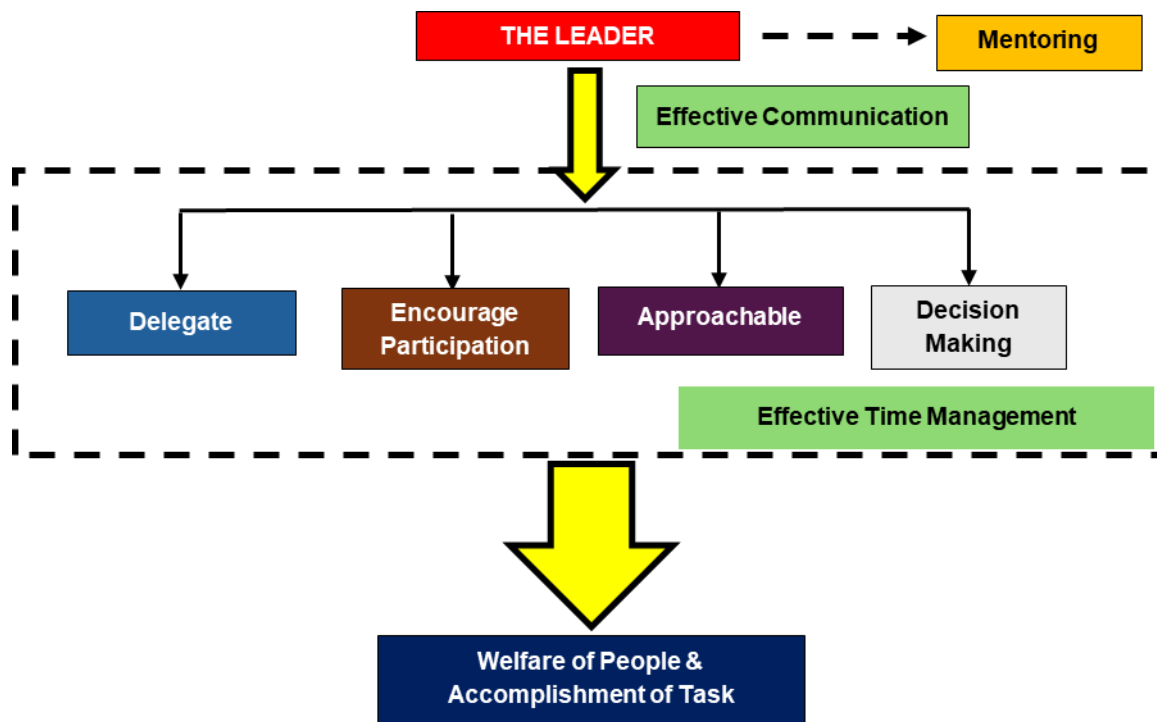


Figure 2: Conduct of a Leader

These models are grounded in Kautilyan philosophy, which links personal qualities with practical leadership methods. This foundation makes their development clear and justified. These models gain further credibility because they match the realities of today's military environment, which includes the need for emotional intelligence, systemic thinking, strategic vision, and strong ethics. They connect ancient understanding with modern demands. This makes the models culturally meaningful and practically useful. As a result, they offer a solid framework for leadership development within the Indian Armed Forces.

CONCLUSION

People have studied leadership in many places and time periods, and the meaning often changes depending on the situation. A lot of the research we see today is Western because most of the dominance of English. But newer studies show that leadership is shaped by culture.

The Arthashastra emphasizes that a king must possess exemplary leadership qualities, intellect, and energy. It teaches that leaders should lead by example and maintain high standards. True power rests not in one's position, but in constructive, ethical use of authority. Arthashastra's view of leadership focuses on self-growth, ethics, and real competence. These ideas feel natural within Indian society because they align closely with its cultural values.

The Arthashastra provides timeless leadership lessons which are rooted in India's own traditions. The leadership models suggested in this paper aim to integrate Kautilya's concepts into contemporary leadership training for India's Armed Forces. The suggested leadership models are a modest attempt to figuratively depict the teachings of the Arthashastra on aspects related to leadership as comprehended by the authors. It is felt that the models will find applicability as well as acceptability for training of future Indian Armed Forces officers.



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