

Saptāṅga Theory in Kautilya's Arthaśāstra and Kamandakiya Nītisāra: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a comparative study of the *Saptāṅga Theory of State* as formulated in two foundational Sanskrit treatises: Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* (4th century BCE) and Kamandaka's *Nītisāra* (circa 4th–7th century CE). Both works, composed in distinct historical contexts, the Mauryan and Gupta periods, conceive the state as a living organism made up of seven interdependent elements: *Svāmin* (King), *Amātya* (Minister), *Janapada* (Territory), *Durga* (Fort), *Kośa* (Treasury), *Daṇḍa* (Army), and *Mitra* (Ally). Yet, their treatments differ markedly in tone and orientation. Kautilya presents governance through the lens of strategic realism, economic pragmatism, and political surveillance, emphasizing *danḍanīti*, espionage, and fiscal discipline. In contrast, Kamandaka advances a *dharma*-oriented model of kingship, stressing moral leadership, ethical diplomacy, social cohesion, and just warfare (*dharma-yuddha*). This study examines these contrasts and continuities through a textual-analytical approach, drawing upon Sanskrit verses and modern critical commentaries. Beyond textual comparison, the paper highlights the contemporary relevance of the *Saptāṅga* framework for governance, public policy, federal administration, and international relations. The seven limbs align closely with present-day state structures and can be reinterpreted within the discourse of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) to revitalize indigenous models of polity. It concludes that the *Saptāṅga Theory* is not merely a historical construct but a civilizational blueprint for holistic governance, where power, ethics, and strategy coalesce. Its revival offers a pathway to re-indigenize political science and rearticulate statecraft on Bhāratiya terms.

Keywords: Saptāṅga Theory, Dharma and Nīti, Statecraft, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Introduction

The classical Indian tradition of political thought is characterized by an interweaving of *dharma*, *artha*, and *nīti*. Rather than being a derivative of Western political models, ancient Indian political philosophy developed its own structures grounded in *śāstric* reasoning, statecraft, and ethical realism. Among its most influential contributions is the *Saptāṅga Theory*, the "Seven-Limbed Theory of the State," which envisions the state as an organic entity composed of interdependent parts (*aṅgas*). This model receives its fullest articulation in two Sanskrit treatises: Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* and Kamandaka's *Nītisāra*.

In the *Arthaśāstra*, Kautilya (also known as Chanakya or Viṣṇugupta), minister to Chandragupta Maurya in the 4th century BCE, outlines the seven limbs of the state:

svāmī-amātya-janapada-durga-kośa-daṇḍa-mitrāṇi prakṛtayah (*Arthaśāstra* 6.1.1).

Translated: The King, the Minister, the Territory, the Fort, the Treasury, the Army, and the Ally are the natural constituents of the state.

These elements are not treated in isolation but integrated into a hierarchical and strategic order that reflects both *realpolitik* and pragmatism.

Kamandaka's *Nītisāra*, though aligned with the same sevenfold model, emphasizes ethical kingship, diplomacy, and moral conduct. In *Nītisāra*, we find:

svāmī amātyaś ca rāṣṭraṃ ca durgam kośo balaṃ suhr̥t | parasparopakāridam saptāṅgam rājyam ucyate || (*Nītisāra* 4.1).

This declares that the ruler (*svāmī*), ministers (*amātya*), territory (*rāṣṭra*), fort (*durga*), treasury (*kośa*), army (*bala*), and ally (*suhr̥t*) together constitute a state, bound by interdependence.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of the *Saptāṅga Theory* in the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Nītisāra*. While both works agree on the indispensability of the seven limbs, their philosophical underpinnings and historical contexts diverge, yielding two complementary visions of governance.

The objectives of this study are:

- To analyze each of the seven limbs as described in both texts.
- To assess the philosophical and strategic orientation of each work.
- To identify similarities and differences in their treatment of governance and ethics.

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4. To examine the relevance of the *Saptāṅga* model in modern administrative thought.

Methodologically, this study is textual and comparative, relying primarily on critical editions and English translations, notably R.P. Kangle's edition of the *Arthaśāstra* and Sisir Kumar Mitra's edition of the *Nīṭisāra*. Commentaries by scholars such as L.N. Rangarajan, A.S. Altekar, and P.V. Kane are also consulted. The approach remains grounded in Indic categories, allowing *dharma*, *artha*, and *nīti* to speak within their own civilizational context.

The aim is to recover and reinterpret the Indian political imagination through these classical works, thereby contributing to the continuity of the *Bhārātīya Rājanīti-Jñāna Paramparā* (Indian Political Knowledge Tradition).

Conceptual Framework of the Saptāṅga Theory

The *Saptāṅga Siddhānta* presents a model of political organization where the state (*rājya*) is conceived not as a mechanical structure but as a living organism (*jīvatirūpa*) with interdependent parts (*aṅgas*). Its conceptual roots lie in Vedic and post-Vedic thought, where kingship (*rājatva*) and social order (*dharma*) were linked to cosmic harmony.

The *R̥gveda* (1.164) uses metaphors of the body politic, while the *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* discusses duties of kings, ministers, and allies, an embryonic form of the sevenfold vision. The mature model appears in the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Nīṭisāra*. Kautilya defines the seven limbs: *svāmī-amātya-janapada-durga-kośa-daṇḍa-mitrāṇi prakṛtayah* (*Arthaśāstra* 6.1.1). Kamandaka reiterates:

svāmī amātyaś ca rāṣṭram ca durgam kośo balaṃ suhṛt | parasparopakāṛīdam saptāṅgam rājyam ucyate || (*Nīṭisāra* 4.1)

The *Manusmṛti* (7.54–59) also emphasizes ministers, forts, treasury, and army as supports of the king, resonating with the same governing principles, though without formalizing the septa.

In this model, each *aṅga* is a functional necessity:

1. Svāmin (King): Sovereign authority whose character, education, and adherence to *dharma* determine the state's health.
2. Amātya (Minister): Advisors and administrators, tested for loyalty, intellect, and integrity (*Arthaśāstra* 1.9–10).
3. Janapada (Territory and People): Agricultural, commercial, and demographic base; prosperity depends on economic vitality (*Arthaśāstra* 2.1).
4. Durga (Fortified Capital): Strategic and defensive center, detailed by Kautilya in architecture and geography (*Arthaśāstra* 2.3).

5. Kośa (Treasury): Financial reserves from taxation, trade, and surplus; depletion weakens sovereignty (*Arthaśāstra* 2.6).
6. Daṇḍa (Armed Force): Military and policing apparatus for internal order and external defense (*Arthaśāstra* 10).
7. Mitra (Ally): Diplomatic partners; Kamandaka emphasizes trustworthy and virtuous alliances (*Nīṭisāra* 6).

Each limb is essential, and imbalance threatens stability. Both texts insist on vigilance, nourishment, and balance of these *prakṛtis* to maintain sovereignty, order, and prosperity. The *Saptāṅga Theory* thus represents an indigenous synthesis of material realism and moral order, offering a systemic model of governance rare in other traditions.

Saptāṅga in Kautilya's Arthaśāstra

Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* is one of the most systematic and pragmatic treatises on governance in the Indic tradition. While *artha* (material well-being and polity) is its foundation, Kautilya does not disregard *dharma* and *kāma*. His framework of *daṇḍanīti* is central, not only for securing sovereignty but also for regulating internal order and preserving social harmony. Governance, in this vision, is the art of balancing competing forces with prudence, vigilance, and moral clarity.

At the heart of this vision lies the *Saptāṅga Theory*, presented in *Arthaśāstra* Book VI, Chapter 1 as the seven *prakṛtis* (constituents) of the state (*Arthaśāstra* 6.1.1). Each *aṅga* functions as part of a living body, and the health of the state depends on their coordination.

1. Svāmin (The King): The king (*svāmin*) is the central pillar of the polity. Kautilya emphasizes qualities such as *śaurya* (valor), *vijñāna* (knowledge), *vinaya* (discipline), and *svadharma* (personal conduct) (*Arthaśāstra* 1.1). He must be trained in the *trayī* (Veda), *anvīkṣikī* (logic), *vārtā* (economics), and *daṇḍanīti* (science of polity) (*Arthaśāstra* 1.2). Leadership is hands-on: the king supervises administration and justice personally.

2. Amātya (Ministers): The *amātyas* form the king's administrative arms. Kautilya prescribes strict qualifications: ancestry, loyalty, intelligence, and integrity (*Arthaśāstra* 1.8). Prospective ministers were tested through trials of attachment (*sneha*), righteousness (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and fear (*bhaya*) (*Arthaśāstra* 1.10). The bureaucracy was specialized, hierarchical, and accountable, with fixed salaries and anti-corruption protocols.

3. Janapada (Territory and Population): The strength of a state rests on fertile territory and a cooperative populace. Kautilya describes the ideal *janapada* as fertile, well-watered, disease-free, resource-

rich, and inhabited by loyal people (*Arthaśāstra* 2.1). Agriculture (*kṛṣi*), irrigation (*setu*), cattle-rearing (*paśupālana*), and trade (*vāṇijya*) were prioritized as economic foundations.

4. Durga (Fortified Capital): The fort (*durga*) is the state's protective shield. Kautilya details the construction of ideal forts: moats, ramparts, storage facilities, temples, and secret passages (*Arthaśāstra* 2.3). Geography was strategic: locations between rivers and mountains were preferred for defense and trade. The *durga* was not merely defensive; it housed treasuries, archives, and military supplies.

5. Kośa (Treasury): The treasury is the lifeblood of governance. Kautilya lists revenue sources: taxes, fines, mines, forests, trade, and tributes (*Arthaśāstra* 2.6). He warns against oppressive taxation, emphasizing:

*prajā-sukhe sukhaṃ rājñāḥ prajānāṃ ca hite hitam |
nātma-priyaṃ hitaṃ rājñāḥ prajānāṃ tu priyaṃ hitam ||*
(*Arthaśāstra* 1.19.34)

"In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness; in their welfare, his welfare. The king's own pleasure is not his good, but what pleases the subjects is his good."

6. Daṇḍa (Army and Coercive Power): The army ensures both internal order and external defense. *Arthaśāstra* Book X describes the organization of infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots, with rules for training, pay, and discipline (Kangle 1963: 413). Espionage was integrated into military strategy, with agents monitoring loyalty and enemy moves. The army was not just a fighting force but also a deterrent against instability.

7. Mitra (Allies): Diplomacy occupies a central place in Kautilya's vision. In *Arthaśāstra* Book VII, he elaborates the sixfold foreign policy (*ṣaḍguṇya nīti*): peace (*saṃdhi*), war (*vigraha*), neutrality (*āsana*), dual policy (*dvaiddhibhāva*), seeking shelter (*saṃśraya*), and making gifts (*dāna*). He advises that "the enemy of one's enemy is a friend," but cautions that alliances are conditional on shared interests (*Arthaśāstra* 7.9). Espionage was used to verify allies' reliability.

Summary of Kautilya's Model

Kautilya recognized two major dangers: internal decay (corruption, fiscal weakness, rebellion) and external invasion or betrayal. The *Saptāṅga* model thus functions as a diagnostic framework: the health of each *aṅga* reveals the overall strength of the state (*prakṛti-bala*, *Arthaśāstra* 6.2). Weakness in one limb (whether *kośa* or *daṇḍa*) could endanger sovereignty.

Kautilya's *Saptāṅga Rājya* is strategic and systemic. Unlike utopian ideals, it is built on empirical realities and human psychology. Power is institutionalized, responsibility distributed, and statehood treated as a craft. For Kautilya, governance is not merely

moral aspiration but a disciplined art of survival and expansion.

Saptāṅga in Kamandakiya Nīṭisāra

The *Nīṭisāra* of Kamandaka, while inspired by Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, presents a more ethical and idealistic vision of governance. Likely composed during the Gupta or early post-Gupta period, it integrates statecraft (*nīti*) with *rājadharmā*. Authority, in this framework, rests not merely on conquest but on virtue, wisdom, and public welfare. Kamandaka's aphoristic style aligns with the broader *nīti* literature, reflecting a cultural moment when political theory was moralized without being divorced from pragmatism.

Like Kautilya, Kamandaka bases his conception of the state on the *Saptāṅga* model. In *Nīṭisāra* (4.1), he affirms:

*svāmī amātyaś ca rāṣṭraṃ ca durgaṃ kośo balaṃ suhṛt |
parasparopakāritvaṃ saptāṅgaṃ rājyaṃ ucyate ||*
(*Nīṭisāra* 4.1).

This verse highlights interdependence (*parasparopakāritva*) as the basis of state unity, foreshadowing Kamandaka's greater emphasis on diplomacy and ethical kingship.

Ethical Polity and the King

Unlike Kautilya's politically hardened sovereign, Kamandaka's king is envisioned as a *dhārmika puruṣa*, whose personal integrity sustains the polity. At *Nīṭisāra* (2.1–2), he insists that the ruler must master the four sciences:

*“ānvīkṣikīṃ trayīṃ vārtāṃ daṇḍanītiṃ ca pārthivaḥ |
tadvidyais tatkriyopetais cintayed vinayānvitah ||* (*Nīṭisāra* 2.1).

Translation: "The king should study *Anvīkṣikī*, the Vedas (*Trayī*), economics (*Vārtā*), and *Daṇḍanīti*, and reflect upon them with discipline and proper practice."

Here, kingship is more than sovereignty; it is moral stewardship, aligning *artha* with *dharma*.

Emphasis on Diplomacy and Allies (Mitra)

Kamandaka deepens the role of alliances and diplomacy (*mantrayuddha*). In *Nīṭisāra* (Chapter 6), he elaborates on the *maṇḍala theory*, analyzing the psychology of rulers and the trustworthiness of allies. He distinguishes between natural (*sahaja*), artificial (*kṛtrima*), and inherited (*karmaja*) friends, stressing that genuine allies must be virtuous and consistent. Conciliation (*sāma*) and gifts (*dāna*) are prioritized, while war (*vigraha*) is seen as a last resort.

Ethical Ministers (Amātya)

Kamandaka devotes extended discussion to the qualities of ministers. In *Nīṭisāra* (4.12–39), he warns against corrupt counselors:

“nirundhānāḥ satāṃ mārgaṃ bhakṣayanti mahīpatim |

duṣṭātmanān tu sacivān asmāt susacivo bhavet || (Nīṭisāra 4.12).

Translation: "Ministers who obstruct the path of the virtuous consume the king himself; corrupt advisers destroy the ruler."

He prescribes selection based on purity (*śaucam*), compassion (*dayā*), truthfulness (*satyam*), and loyalty (*anurakti*) (Nīṭisāra 4.24–28). Before appointment, ministers are to be tested secretly (*upadhā*) for honesty and competence (Nīṭisāra 4.25–26). Thus, ethical erosion is directly linked to political decline.

Janapada and Internal Harmony

While Kautilya treats the *janapada* primarily as a productive base, Kamandaka underscores moral well-being and social harmony. He urges kings to avoid excessive taxation, protect vulnerable groups, and tour the realm to hear grievances (*praja-paripālana*). Governance, here, is participatory and compassionate.

Daṇḍa, Kośa, and Durga: Softer Emphasis

Though Kamandaka acknowledges the need for *daṇḍa*, *kośa*, and *durga*, he softens their role. Force is a last resort, to be applied only when peaceful means fail (Nīṭisāra 7.15). Treasury is vital, but he criticizes hoarding or vanity projects that burden the people (Nīṭisāra 5.11). Forts are necessary, yet their moral utility, protecting subjects, matters as much as their physical strength.

Idealism vs. Realism

The most striking contrast lies in orientation. Kautilya's realism endorses espionage, deception, and preemptive strikes. Kamandaka, by contrast, insists: "A king should rather suffer loss than act against *dharma*" (Nīṭisāra 9.13). Where Kautilya writes that "a weak king must pretend to be strong" (Arthaśāstra 7.14), Kamandaka advocates patience and moral restraint.

This divergence reflects different contexts: Mauryan expansionism required hard realism, whereas Gupta stability permitted an ethics-centered model of rule.

Summary of Kamandaka's Model

Kamandaka's *Saptāṅga* is not naïve idealism but a morally enriched vision of statecraft. By grounding governance in character and diplomacy, he offers a counterpoint to Kautilya's strategic pragmatism. His contribution embeds *dharma* and *dayā* into polity, ensuring that state power serves justice as well as survival.

Comparative Analysis

The *Saptāṅga Siddhānta*, as articulated in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* and Kamandaka's *Nīṭisāra*, provides the structural backbone of classical Indian political thought. Separated by several centuries, these works share a common framework yet diverge in emphasis, reflecting two paradigms of governance: strategic realism and ethical idealism.

Similarities

1. Structural Consistency

Both Kautilya and Kamandaka uphold the sevenfold model: *svāmin*, *amātya*, *janapada*, *durga*, *kośa*, *daṇḍa*, and *mitra* (Arthaśāstra 6.1.1; Nīṭisāra 4.1). This continuity underscores the deeply ingrained Indic conception of the state as an organic whole, where no component is optional.

2. Balance of the Limbs

Both stress that imbalance among the seven limbs weakens the polity. For example, a strong army without a sound treasury, or a virtuous king without capable ministers, leads to dysfunction. Each limb strengthens and supports the others.

3. Integration of Morality and Pragmatism

Neither text is ethically neutral. Kautilya embeds morality within pragmatic strategy, while Kamandaka embeds strategy within a moral cosmos. Both acknowledge that governance requires not only technical skill but also ethical grounding.

Differences

1. Strategic Realism vs. Ethical Idealism:

Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* is marked by economic pragmatism and strategic realism. His chapters on taxation, espionage, and foreign policy are systematic and calculative (Arthaśāstra 2.6; 7.1–7.18). By contrast, Kamandaka's *Nīṭisāra* emphasizes *dharma*, truth, and compassion (Nīṭisāra 9.13).

2. Role of Espionage and Daṇḍa: Kautilya institutionalizes espionage (*guptacāra tantra*) into categories like *kapāṭika* and *tikṣṇa* agents (Arthaśāstra 1.12). He also views *daṇḍa* as the guarantor of order (Arthaśāstra 10). Kamandaka, while not rejecting these tools, applies them cautiously and only under moral scrutiny (Nīṭisāra 7.15).

3. Diplomacy and Mitra: Kautilya's diplomacy follows the sixfold foreign policy (*śāḍgunya nīti*) (Arthaśāstra 7.1–7.18). Kamandaka expands this with psychological insight and typologies of friendship, highlighting trust, virtue, and cultural bonds (Nīṭisāra 6). His approach to *mitra* is thus more nuanced and ethically framed.

4. Historical Context: Kautilya's Mauryan context demanded centralized, muscular governance amid external threats and internal instability. His realism reflects imperial expansion and survival. Kamandaka, writing in the comparatively stable Gupta milieu, could emphasize ethics, consensus, and social harmony.

Complementary Paradigms

If Kautilya represents the *śāstra* of power, analytical, strategic, and pragmatic, Kamandaka represents the *śāstra* of virtue, ethical, consultative, and humanistic. Taken together, they reveal the intellectual

depth of the Indic tradition: the ability to balance survival with morality, force with ethics, and power with purpose.

Relevance of the Saptāṅga Theory in Contemporary Governance

Although conceived in the classical period, the *Saptāṅga Siddhānta* remains strikingly relevant to present-day political and administrative structures. Rather than a relic of the past, it provides a dynamic framework that parallels the systemic interdependence of modern governance. Its holistic character resonates with contemporary approaches in political science, public administration, and strategic studies.

Saptāṅga as a Conceptual Bridge

Modern political theory increasingly emphasizes multidimensional models of governance. The *Saptāṅga* framework anticipates this integrative approach. Each limb corresponds to core functions of the modern state:

- *Svāmin* → sovereign leadership (head of state/government).
- *Amātya* → bureaucratic institutions and administration.
- *Janapada* → population and territory, akin to electorate and demography.
- *Durga* → security and urban infrastructure.
- *Kośa* → fiscal management and reserves.
- *Daṇḍa* → judiciary, law enforcement, and military.
- *Mitra* → diplomacy, alliances, and soft power.

This mapping demonstrates the foresight of Indic political thought in anticipating systemic interdependence (cf. Kautilya, *Arthaśāstra* 6.1.1; Kamandaka, *Nītisāra* 4.1).

Application to Federal Structure and Administration

India's federal polity can be interpreted through a *Saptāṅga*-inspired lens. Just as each *aṅga* sustains the state, harmonious functioning among constitutional organs is vital today:

- *Kośa* and *daṇḍa* → call for fiscal transparency and restrained use of force, echoing Kautilya's warning against exploitative taxation (*Arthaśāstra* 1.19.34).
- *Amātya* → highlights the need for ethical, competent, and accountable bureaucracy, recalling Kamandaka's emphasis on ministerial purity (*Nītisāra* 4.24–28).
- *Durga* → aligns with modern concerns of infrastructure, border resilience, and disaster preparedness.

Similarly, *daṇḍa* and *mitra* extend naturally to defense policy and international relations, where stability and trust-based diplomacy remain as crucial as in antiquity.

Lessons for Leadership and Policy

Kautilya's ideal king, trained in *trayī*, *anvīkṣikī*, and *daṇḍanīti*, parallels today's call for leaders educated in constitutional law, economics, and strategic studies (*Arthaśāstra* 1.2). Kamandaka's insistence on compassion and moral restraint reminds modern policymakers that public trust is built through fairness, not coercion (*Nītisāra* 9.13).

Both perspectives suggest that leadership must integrate technical competence with ethical vision, balancing pragmatism with moral accountability.

Integration into IKS

The revival of *Saptāṅga* within the framework of IKS under NEP 2020 opens pathways for embedding classical insights into curricula for civil services, law, public policy, and defense studies. Training modules can adopt the seven-limb framework as a diagnostic model, monitoring governance through indicators like fiscal health (*kośa*), public morale (*janapada*), civil–military balance (*daṇḍa*), and diplomatic credibility (*mitra*).

Such integration would shift analysis from borrowed epistemologies toward Indic categories of *śakti* (power), *dharma* (ethics), and *yukti* (strategy), making governance studies more rooted and holistic.

Summary of Contemporary Relevance

The *Saptāṅga Theory* anticipates many structures of the modern state, yet with an added emphasis on ethical integration. Whether applied to federal functioning, leadership training, or international diplomacy, its relevance lies in bridging material pragmatism with moral purpose. It offers an indigenous framework for facing 21st-century challenges without fragmenting governance into isolated silos.

Conclusion

This study has offered a comparative exploration of the *Saptāṅga Theory* as presented in two foundational works of Indian political thought: Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* and Kamandaka's *Nītisāra*. Both texts affirm the sevenfold model of the state, *svāmin*, *amātya*, *janapada*, *durga*, *kośa*, *daṇḍa*, and *mitra*, yet they interpret and prioritize these constituents differently.

Kautilya, writing in the Mauryan context, built a realist framework emphasizing surveillance, resource management, and military preparedness. His model is pragmatic, institutional, and oriented toward survival and expansion. Kamandaka, working in the Gupta milieu, integrated the same sevenfold model into a more ethically charged vision of polity, highlighting moral kingship, diplomatic trust, and compassionate administration.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the *Saptāṅga* framework is dynamic, not rigid, capable of adapting to shifting political contexts while retaining its structural coherence. Kautilya's strategic realism and Kamandaka's ethical idealism together enrich the Indic

political tradition, offering complementary paradigms of power and virtue.

In contemporary times, the *Saptāṅga* theory provides a valuable lens for governance studies. It reminds us that leadership, administration, economy, defense, and diplomacy are interdependent and must be harmonized. More importantly, it suggests that governance must be both pragmatic and ethical, balancing *artha* with *dharma*.

By revisiting Kautilya and Kamandaka not merely as historical figures but as enduring theorists of statecraft, this study contributes to the broader revival of *Bhāratīya Rājanīti-Jñāna Paramparā* (Indian Political Knowledge Tradition). The *Saptāṅga* theory thus continues to serve as both a civilizational memory and a practical guide for modern governance.

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