

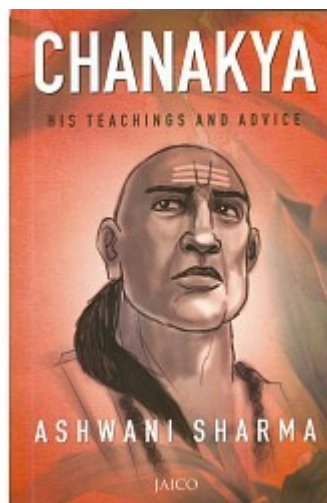
Chanakya - Scholar and Administrator Par Excellence

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Chanakya (350-275 BCE) was a great Indian teacher, philosopher, statesman, royal adviser, economist and jurist. Alternatively known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, he penned the ancient Indian political treatise, the Arthashastra. He is said to be the pioneer of economics and political science in India.

A Brahmin, originally hailing from Northern India, he was also a professor of political science and economics at the University of Takshashila, also known as Taxila. A past master of Vedas and ancient Indian literature, he is believed to have had some knowledge of Zoroastrianism as well.

Chanakya was as shrewd as he was wise. He helped the first Mauryan Emperor, Chandragupta, to establish the Mauryan Empire and was an immense asset to him during his rule. Chanakya also served as Chief Advisor and Prime Minister to both Chandragupta and his son, Bindusara. His immense works were lost towards the end of the Gupta Empire and were rediscovered only in the early 20th Century.



Chanakya

Let us now learn about this Himalayan personality.

Background

There is no official, exact record about Chanakya's life and times. Precious little historically documented information can be found on him - most of it comes from semi-legendary sources.

An in-depth exploration reveals various distinct accounts of the Chanakya-Chandragupta katha. The only thing common in all these versions is that Chanakya was once insulted by the Nanda King and vowed to annihilate him. After dethroning the Nandas, he installed his master, Chandragupta, as the King.

As Kautilya or Vishnugupta

Chanakya is often associated with the Arthashastra, which identifies its author's name as Kautilya. Only one verse in it refers to him as Vishnugupta. Some believe that Chanakya was given the name Kautilya as that was the gotra (clan) that he came from. However, there is yet another more interesting theory about the emergence of this name.

The word "Kutila" in Sanskrit means "crooked". He could have been given this name, as he was a shrewd politician, who knew the ins and outs of administration.

Vishnu Sharma's Panchatantra (3rd Century BCE) explicitly identifies Chanakya as Vishnugupta. However, there is no historical record about this - it is possible that these three names belonged to three different people.

Life of Chanakya

Chanakya's birthplace is a subject of controversy. Some believe that he was born in Takshashila, while others aver that he was born in South India. He was the son of Chanak (or Canin) and Canesvari. He hence got his name from his father.

He was educated at the ancient University of Takshashila and later, went on to become a professor there. Though he was raised as an orthodox Brahmin, he knew that he had the capability to rule a kingdom. He was not handsome, but his tremendous knowledge more than made up for his lack of looks.

Dhana Nanda and Chanakya

When Chanakya was old enough, he began searching for a true king. That is when he met Dhana Nanda, the king of the Nanda dynasty. According to the Mahabodhivamsa, Dhana Nanda was the last ruler of the Nanda dynasty. He is referred to as Agrammes or Xandrames in Greek history. The name Agrammes may have come the Sanskrit word, "Augrasainya", which means, "son or descendant of Ugrasena".

Dhana Nanda inherited the throne from his father, Mahapadma Nanda. He is believed to have been powerful and ruled over the Parsii (Prachya) and the Gangaridai people. During his tenure, the Nanda Empire spanned from Bihar to Bengal in the east and from Punjab to Sindh in the west. His army was very large - it consisted of 200,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalry, 2,000 war chariots and 3,000 war elephants. He, however, was quite unpopular, both with his own subjects and with the neighboring states as well. That was probably because his government levied heavy taxes and fleeced the people of their wealth.

The people of Kalinga especially despised the Nanda clan, as they belonged to the Shudra varna (the lowest caste). In order to diffuse the political tension, Prince Shaurya Nanda wedded Damyanti of Kalinga. However, that only worsened the situation - the marriage itself was short-lived. That further complicated the equation between the two dynasties. During his reign, Dhana Nanda carried on the same ill-feeling for the Kalinga dynasty.

Dhana Nanda had four ministers, namely, Bandu, Subandu, Kubera and Sakatala. Sakatala spent the entire money in the treasury to purchase peace from the Mleccha invaders. When the king knew of this, he got furious and punished him by casting him into a subterranean dungeon, along with his family. He also provided them with a mere handful of grains and very little water, which was barely sufficient for one human being to survive. Eventually, Sakatala lost his entire family, one by one and he was the only survivor.

Seeing that the land was vulnerable, the foreign invaders again declared war. Realizing what an asset Sakatala was, Nanda freed him and requested his assistance. Wanting to avenge the death of his family at the hands of the king, Sakatala refused to help and left. He then joined hands with Chanakya.

Dhana Nanda Insults Chanakya

According to Buddhist legend, Chanakya was interested in a position available at a daankendra or charity center. The king wanted only a Brahmin to run the center. He was well aware that he was very unpopular - there was even a rumor that he could be assassinated at any time. Dhana Nanda opened up this daankendra in a bid to salvage his flagging image.

Chanakya entered the palace to apply for the royal position. On entering, he saw nine seats lined up on either side of the throne. Out of these, eight were for the Nanda Princes. Chanakya promptly rested on the empty seat, which was reserved for the person who would become the manager of the daankendra. He then boldly declared that, his unkempt appearance notwithstanding, he was indisputably the best man for the job.

Disgusted by Chanakya's unsightly countenance, Dhana Nanda and a few other princes assembled there, insulted him, calling him an ugly monkey. The king also thought that he was

not refined enough in behavior and hence, refused to offer him the position. Humiliated and angry, Chanakya vowed that he would not re-tie his topknot until he had destroyed king Dhana Nanda and his entire clan.

Chanakya Fulfils His Vow

The exact circumstances of Dhana Nanda's destruction and ultimate death are not clear. Some narratives suggest that he was killed by Chandragupta Maurya himself, after the latter captured Pataliputra. When he lost the battle, he was permitted to leave his capital, along with his two wives. He also gave away his daughter in marriage to the Mauryan Emperor.

Other stories relate that Dhana Nanda went into exile after Chanakya stealthily captured Pataliputra. He was never seen or heard of after he fled from there. Some other sources seem to suggest that Chanakya ordered that he be killed while on his exile, thus clearing the path for Chandragupta to occupy Pataliputra's throne.

Yet another interesting version suggests that Dhana Nanda adopted Buddhism just before going on exile. He completely renounced the material world after his clan got wiped out during the war. When Chanakya realized that he was no longer a threat, he left him alive and let him leave from there forever.

Other Legends about Chanakya

As mentioned earlier, there are several versions of Chanakya's life story. Here are the Buddhist and the Jain versions of the legend:

Buddhist Version

The earliest Buddhist source which makes a mention of Chanakya is Vamsatthappakasini, a commentary on the Mahavamsa. This piece relates that the Nanda kings were robbers, who became rulers of Pataliputra.

Chanakya was a Brahmin from Takkasila (Takshashila), who was an expert in the Vedas, aspects of ruling and political administration. He had canine teeth, which were then said to be a mark of royalty. His mother was always concerned that he would abandon her after he became king and so, he broke his teeth, in order to pacify her. He was otherwise not at all good-looking. His broken teeth, crooked feet and awkward stance made him the butt of others' jokes.

One day, he went to a ceremony which was conducted by King Dhana Nanda. Disgusted with his ugly appearance, the king ordered him to be thrown out from there. In rage, Chanakya broke his sacred thread and cursed the king. He then escaped arrest and fled in the disguise of an Ajivika. Later, he befriended the king's son Pabbata and instigated him to seize power from his father.

Chanakya then fled to the Vinjha forest, where he made 800 million gold coins using a siddhi (power), which enabled him to turn 1 coin into 8. He hid the money in a safe spot and went in search of someone worthy enough to replace Dhana Nanda.

He happened to see the 13 year-old Chandragupta playing along with his friends. He was acting as a king, while the others pretended to be the ministers, vassals or bandits. Seeing the young boy's powerful presence, he immediately knew that he had found his man. Chanakya then approached Chandragupta's foster father and, paying him 1000 gold coins, took the boy away from his home and under his wing.

For the next 7 years, Chanakya trained the boy and prepared him for his royal duties. When he came of age, Chanakya dug up his hidden treasure and bought an entire army with it. This army invaded Dhana Nanda's kingdom, but eventually faced defeat. Chanakya and Chandragupta then analyzed the reason for their defeat, assembled a new army and started conquering the bordering villages first, slowly moving inward. Finally, they killed Dhana Nanda and lay seize on Pataliputra.

In the meantime, the king's wife died a few days before childbirth. In order to save his child, he opened his wife's belly with his sword, took the child out and nursed the infant till he was strong enough to manage on his own. He named the child Bindusara.

Dhammapada's commentary on Theragatha, however, gives a different version of the legend. It mentions a Brahmin named Subandhu. In this tale, Subandhu was as sharp and wise as Chanakya. This made the latter anxious that he may one day surpass him at Chandragupta's court. So Chanakya planned a clever plot and got the king to imprison Subandhu. The latter's son, Tekicchakani, later escaped and became a Buddhist monk. Later, Chanakya met Bindusara and decided to make Bindusara the master of the entire territory between the eastern and western seas.

Jain Version

It is believed that the Jain version of the legend is far older and more consistent than the Buddhist version. According to this account, Chanakya was born to Jains Chanin and Chanesvari. This version implies that he was a Dramila, or a native of South India.

He was born with a full set of teeth, which implied that he would one day become king. Not wanting his son to become arrogant, Chanin broke Chanakya's teeth. Several monks then prophesied that he would be the power behind the throne. Many mocked the boy's poverty. This motivated him to visit king Dhana Nanda, who was known for his charity towards Brahmins. Once inside the palace, he seated himself on the throne and refused to leave it. He eventually got humiliated and was kicked out of there. An enraged Chanakya vowed to uproot

the Nanda clan and stormed out.

Later, Chanakya met the young Chandragupta and, impressed by his personality and show of power, decided to train him to be a ruler. Assembling wealth by means of his powers of alchemy, Chanakya took the boy and went to Pataliputra. He and his army got severely defeated by Nanda's army. After that, he formed an alliance with Parvataka, the king of Himavatkuta. Together, they lay siege on the towns surrounding Pataliputra. Once that was done, Chanakya's army issued a surprise offensive on Pataliputra. This time, they won and captured the town.

They permitted Nanda to go into exile after getting his daughter married to Chandragupta. In the meantime, Parvataka fell in love with one of Nanda's vishakanyas (poison girl). Chanakya also approved of the marriage, knowing well that he would die if he so much as touched her. Sure enough, Parvataka died during the marriage and Chandragupta became the undisputed ruler.

In due course of time, the king had a child, who he named Bindusara. After the boy came of age, Chandragupta decided to give up the throne and become a Jain monk. He also anointed Bindusara as the new ruler. Chanakya asked Bindusara to appoint Subandhu as his minister. However, the latter started working against him, instigating Bindusara against him. Chanakya, who was quite old by then, retired from his post. Realizing that this was his golden opportunity, Subandhu slyly plotted to kill Chanakya and burned him to death.

According to another Jain text, Chanakya accompanied Chandragupta into the forest, after anointing Bindusara as king. Then, both men led a peaceful life of retirement. He is believed to have breathed his last in 283 BC.

Chanakya and Alexander the Great

Chanakya and Alexander the Great were both brilliant contemporaries, who never met each other. While the former is credited with the rise of the Mauryan Empire, the latter represents the very first attempt of the West to conquer the Indian subcontinent. Incidentally, it was only two years after Alexander's demise that Chandragupta established his Empire, with Chanakya by his side. Despite belonging to the same time period and living in proximity to each other, these two greats never ever came face-to-face during their lifetimes.

There is much controversy regarding Alexander's invasion of India. He came to India around 327 BC. At that time, the trade between India and Greece flourished, especially that of spices, silk and gold. Alexander tried to cross the Jhelum River to start his invasion, but was stopped by King Purushottam (often referred to as King Porus). The latter stopped his entry into the country. The two armies fought for long during the ensuing epic Battle of Hydaspes. Eventually defeating Porus, Alexander made an alliance with him, also appointing him as satrap of his own

kingdom. After this, Alexander proceeded to conquer all regions along the Indus River.

East of Porus' kingdom, along the Ganga, was the kingdom of Magadha, which was then ruled by the Nanda Dynasty. The army here was formidable - 200,000 infantry, 80,000 cavalry, 8,000 chariots, and 6,000 war elephants strong. This discouraged Alexander's men, who refrained from progressing further into India.

The Greeks Refrain from Invading Magadha

The Macedonians' battle with Porus had left them with only 20,000 infantry and 2,000 horses. Hence, they refused to invade Magadha. His army mutinied at the Hyphasis (present-day Beas). After meeting with his officer Coenus, Alexander decided to return from there. Coenus was one of the ablest and most dependable generals of Alexander during his Eastern expedition. He commanded a portion of Alexander's army and was responsible for a number of the army's victories. He urged his King to give up battle and go back home.

Respecting his General's opinion and knowing that he would never say something like this without enough reason to do so, Alexander decided to turn south. In spite of a decline in health, he continued to fight and conquered all the regions down the Indus River to the Arabian Sea.

Chanakya's Role in the Rise of Chandragupta

Realizing by then that king Nanda had to be defeated in order to bring Chandragupta into power, Chanakya approached king Parvataka (often identified with Porus) and made an alliance with him. Chanakya met the Greek generals as well, to discuss the possibility of an alliance with them as well. Knowing how strong and able they were, he knew that getting them on his side would be immensely beneficial to Chandragupta. He knew that this joint army could easily defeat Dhana Nanda. Sure enough, this alliance gave Chandragupta a formidably powerful army, made up of the Greeks, the Scythians, Nepalese, Persians and several other sects.

This joint army laid siege on Pataliputra from all directions. Seeing the sheer size of the army, the Nanda rulers had no other option but to surrender their beautiful kingdom. Chanakya then founded the Mauryan Empire and placed Chandragupta at its helm.

Chanakya Unifies Political India

Chanakya further trained his new army to overthrow many corrupt rulers and lay siege on their kingdoms. He taught his soldiers the art of guerrilla warfare, asymmetric warfare and so on. He formed a network of spies to politically unify India for the first ever time, under the rule of Chandragupta.

In due course of time, the Greeks developed strong diplomatic ties with India. This prevented

them from invading other Indian territories, while also giving rise to a parallel, rich Indo-Greek culture.

Chanakya Influences Seleucus I Nicator

Seleucus I Nicator, the founder of the Seleucid dynasty, was also one of Alexander's former, most trusted, generals. Chandragupta had once seen Seleucus' daughter, Helena, near the Jhelum River. He instantly fell in love with her and asked Chanakya how he could make her his own. The latter considered the matter for a while and said that it would be possible only if he waged a war against Seleucus and won it. Fresh from the victory over the Nanda dynasty, Chandragupta confidently attacked Seleucus I Nicator and won it.

Again, on Chanakya's advice, Chandragupta called for a meeting with Seleucus. There, he expressed his desire to marry Helena, also mentioning that he would be willing to form an alliance with him, giving him back certain regions he had lost in the war. Seleucus also received 500 war elephants, which he later used in the Battle of Ipsus.

This alliance led to strong diplomatic relations between the two rulers. Seleucus sent an ambassador named Megasthenes to visit Chandragupta's court from time to time, to write about India in general and Chandragupta's reign in particular.

Was Chanakya Responsible for Alexander's Death?

Alexander the Great was, as his name suggested, practically invincible. Chandragupta Maurya had only been able to stop his progress to a certain extent. Alexander could have defeated his huge army base, if he had really wanted to do so. However, a deadly disease gripped him - this forced him to return back home to Macedonia, leaving Seleucus behind to take care of all affairs.

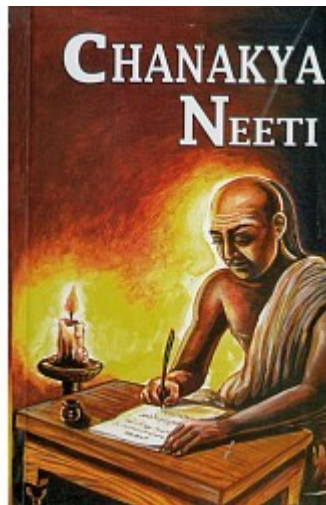
According to popular belief, he breathed his last on the journey to his homeland. He passed away while travelling through Babylon in 323 BC. Some experts, though, believe that Chanakya, along with the clever use of political strategies, also employed the use of black magic to destroy Alexander. When he saw that he could not defeat the mighty warrior by honest means, he chose to take the crooked route to break the latter's resolve and completely annihilate him.

Once the news of Alexander's death reached Chanakya, the latter immediately got into action, planning how to defeat and eliminate Seleucus without bloodshed. His entire plan of getting Helena married to Chandragupta, as mentioned above, served this end.

Arthashastra and Chanakya Neeti

Chanakya is identified as the author of two important books, namely, the Chanakya Neeti

(alternatively referred to as Chanakya-Niti-Shastra) and the Arthashastra.



Chanakya Neeti

Arthashastra speaks in detail about several aspects of administration, such as monetary and fiscal policies, war strategies, welfare, international relations and so on. This treatise also relates the duties of a ruler. Some experts aver that the Arthashastra is actually a compilation of several earlier texts penned by various authors, and that Chanakya may have been one of those authors.

Chanakya's political ideas and maxims, as specified in the Arthashastra are completely practical, unsentimental, controversial and, sometimes, even downright ruthless. This book takes a rather impersonal stance on conducting assassinations, killing family members, managing spies and secret agents, chalking out treaties and then violating them and so on and so forth. Due to this, he is often compared to Machiavelli. That said; his attitude is not so merciless throughout the treatise. He also talks about the moral duties of a king and how he should always place the happiness of his subjects above his own.

Chanakya Neeti, which consists of 17 chapters, is a collection of aphorisms and maxims, which are believed to be selected and gathered by Chanakya from the various shastras. This book is filled with interesting quotes, most of which are relevant even in the present times.

Several Indian nationalists consider Chanakya as one of the greatest ever thinkers. His Arthashastra is still regarded as one of the best resources to learn about developing and implementing strategic national and administrative policies. Several Indian institutes, involved in training, leadership and politics are named after Chanakya.

In Indian Art, Literature and Culture

Chanakya enjoys pride of place in many modern adaptations and semi-fictional works. His

legend is kept alive even in the present time, via books, plays, television serials and films.

An English book, titled "Chanakya on Management" features 216 sutras on raja-neeti, each of which has been translated and commented upon. Ratan Lal Basu and Rajkumar Sen have jointly authored a book, which contains the economics concepts mentioned in the Arthashastra, also explaining their relevance in today's world. A few years ago, several experts discussed Kautilya's philosophy and thought in an International Conference held at Mysore. These and other books and treatises establish the significance of Chanakya's works even in the present time.

10 Interesting Facts about Chanakya

The name Chanakya immediately brings to our mind the image of a serious, scholastic Brahmin, who was as shrewd as he was sharp-witted. However, not many know how truly multifaceted and gifted he was, beneath that somber facade. Here are a few interesting facts about the great persona:

1. Chanakya was a patriot in the truest sense of the term. He could foresee the threat of foreign invasion much before anyone else could even imagine it.
2. He was braver than most. He openly challenged the corrupt Dhana Nanda, in his own court; in front of his own men. He proclaimed that he would destroy the king and anyone else who dared to come in the path of achieving his dream of a united India.
3. Chanakya was the master of disguise. When the king imprisoned him for his impudence, he cleverly used his influence, disguised himself as a woman and fled the city.
4. It is said that a true leader is one who creates more leaders. Chanakya proved that by example - he raised Chandragupta, trained him in warfare, administration, economics and politics; ultimately making him the ruler of Pataliputra. Chandragupta was only 20 years old when he ascended the throne.
5. Chanakya's great vision was to create a unified India; free of foreign rule. He employed every tactic in the book to keep the Greeks at bay. He was not one for war and so, many a time, he chose the neutral path to achieve his goals. Getting Helena wedded to Chandragupta was one such masterstroke, which he used to preempt external attack.
6. He used to consume a wee bit of poison every day, so that his body would get used to it. He did the same with Chandragupta as well - he used to add little doses of poison to his daily meals. Interestingly, this technique is believed to be successfully carried out by zookeepers in Australia, to this very day.

7. Chanakya is also believed to have raised Vishakanyas using the above-mentioned means. He would feed the women small, non-lethal doses of poison, till they themselves became that poison. Anyone that had sexual contact with them would immediately meet their end.

8. He is known to have mastered the art of alchemy - he could convert copper into gold. This is how he amassed the kind of wealth that he did, during his lifetime. Further, it is said that Chanakya could also become invisible at will.

9. Some believe that Chanakya often practiced black magic. Though there is no actual evidence to substantiate this claim, it seemed rather strange the way Alexander suddenly went downhill health-wise - he breathed his last before anyone could do anything about it.

10. No matter how negatively one tries to portray Chanakya, the fact remains that he was utterly devoted to his king, was incorruptible and worked tirelessly towards strengthening and unifying India. During his lifetime, he achieved what most others could not even dream of doing.

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