**Background: The Arthasastra: The Duties of a King, 4th Century BCE**

**The Arthasastra**

*The Arthasastra,* written in Sanskrit by Kautilya*,* presents ideas concerning the ways in which a ruler should gain power and maintain his authority. The *Arthasastra* has been divided into 15 books concerning topics that range from law, war, invasions, to planning a treatise. Kautilya, India's earliest known political philosopher, was an adviser to the rulers of the Mauryan Dynasty which lasted between 324 and 183 BCE. He is known to have been the teacher and guardian of the Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire.

*Arthasastra* has been compared to Machiavelli‘s *The Prince* due to its pragmatic and sometimes brutal means of acquiring and maintain power. It suggests on a regular basis the use of espionage, murder, and false accusations without any concern for morals or ethics. It also focuses at times on ways in which a king may keep in check the ambitions of their sons, and oppositely chapters to help princes spoil the plans of their authoritarian fathers.

The following passage discusses the necessary characteristics of a king, which includes the specific values of efficiency, diligence, energy, compassion, and concern for the security and welfare of the state.

Source: Stephen Hay ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition* (NY: Columbia UP, 1988).

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Only if a king is himself energetically active, do his officers follow him energetically. If he is sluggish, they too remain sluggish. And, besides, they eat up his works. He is thereby easily overpowered by his enemies. Therefore, he should ever dedicate himself energetically to activity.

**Why should kings remain active?**

He should divide the day as well as the night into eight parts . . . during the first one-eighth part of the day, he should listen to reports pertaining to the organization of law and order and to income and expenditure. During the second, he should attend to the affairs of the urban and the rural population. During the third, he should take his bath and meal and devote himself to study. During the fourth, he should receive gold and the departmental heads. During the fifth, he should hold consultations with the council of ministers through correspondence and also keep himself informed of the secret reports brought by spies. During the sixth, he should devote himself freely to amusement or listen to the Counsel of the ministers. During the seventh, he should inspect the military formations of elephants, cavalry, chariots, and infantry. During the eighth, he, together with the commander-in-chief of the army, should make plans for campaigns of conquest. When the day has come to an end he should offer the evening prayers.

**What sorts of operations do you think the secret service agents were sent off to do during the night?**

**Why might the author feel that a king’s time should be divided in a manner such as this?**

**The majority of the king’s daily tasks are focused on…**

During the first one-eighth part of the night, he should meet the officers of the secret service. During the second he should take his bath and meals and also devote himself to study. During the third, at the sounding of the trumpets, he should enter the bed chamber and should sleep through the fourth and fifth. Waking up at the sounding of the trumpets, he should, during the sixth part, ponder over the teachings of the sciences and his urgent duties for the day. During the seventh, he should hold consultations and send out the officers of the secret service for their operations. During the eighth, accompanied by sacrificial priests, preceptors and the chaplain, he should receive benedictions; he should also have interviews with the physician, the kitchen-superintendent, and the astrologer.

A king should attend to all urgent activity; he should not put it off. For what has been thus put off becomes either difficult or altogether impossible to accomplish.

**What is meant by “urgent activity?”**

The vow of the king is energetic activity, his sacrifice is constituted of the discharge of his own administrative duties; his sacrificial fee [to the officiating priests] is his impartiality of attitude toward all; his sacrificial consecration is his anointment as king.

In the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king; in their welfare, his own welfare. The welfare of the king does not lie in the fulfillment of what is dear to him; whatever is dear to the subjects constitutes his welfare.

**Who does the king depend on for his happiness and welfare? Why do you think this is?**

Therefore, ever energetic, a king should act up to the principles of the science of material gain. Energetic activity is the source of material gain; its opposite, of downfall.

In the absence of energetic activity, the loss of what has already been obtained and of what still remains to be obtained is certain. The fruit of one's works is achieved through energetic activity - one obtains abundance of material prosperity.

**Questions to consider:**

1. **What should a king fear?**
2. **Does anything prevent the king from doing whatever he likes?**
3. **If so, how much authority does the king really have?**
4. **Did anyone else, or any other institution, in ancient India have authority, according to this text?**
5. **How is this different from democratic Athens?**