

Adhyetaa Guna: The Qualities of an Ideal Learner from Ancient India

आचार्यात् पादमादत्ते पादं शिष्यः स्वमेधया ।
सब्रह्मचारिभ्यः पादं पादं कालक्रमेण च ॥

*One learns one-fourth from the teacher, one-fourth from own intelligence,
One-fourth from classmates, and one-fourth only with time.*

(16.44, Udyogaparva, Mahabharata).

Introduction

Learning takes place from the time people are born. Every new sensation becomes a unique experience that shapes the behavior of people. As one grows older, the amount of information and roles a person is required to play and adapt to keep increasing, thereby making the function of learning- efficiently and appropriately - a function that needs constant evolution and accurate understanding. Therefore, learning is a continuous process.

Think about it yourself!

In the process of Learning, is the teacher responsible or the student?

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The learner however, is mostly responsible for what they learn, how much they learn and how well they learn. Learning after all is an internal process that takes places. Only the one who has the interest and the zeal to learn would run the extra mile to learn something truly and completely. Although, the process maybe a two-way process, true learning is actually an internal continuum.

In an organization, where there is constant change, and new norms, rules, skills, etc need to be learnt often, it is essential to filter the employees during selection and recruit the ones who have the capability to learn fast and efficiently. In other cases, the process of re-learning might be difficult due to the tendency of the mind to become rigid and fixed with something that it has been familiar with.

In any field of life, learning is essential. And if there is a good learner/student, anything or anyone can be their teacher.

Objectives of this article

1. To understand the qualities and responsibilities of a learner in the learning process from ancient India.

This section of the article consists of the qualities of a ‘learner’/ a ‘student’ who is the one receiving knowledge. The various responsibilities and qualities that a student must possess in order to achieve the clearest understanding in their learning have been investigated by stating and understanding the views of Swami Vivekananda with emphasis on the Cittabhumi theory of concentration and the different planes in which the mind can exist from Vyasa’s commentary on the Yoga Sutras, the qualities given in the Arthashastra by Kautilya and the qualities mentioned in the Vimanasthana of the Charaka Samhita (Ayurveda).

2. To understand and derive qualities of an ideal learner from the character analysis of Nachiketa from the Kathopanishad.

This section of the article consists of the character analysis of Nachiketa from the Kathopanishad and the qualities of an ideal learner have been derived through his character analysis as well as by understanding the qualities possessed by him, as mentioned by Yama.

Learning is the Responsibility of the Learner

Learning starts as soon as one is born. A child with wonder in their eyes closely observes everything around them and steps into the process of learning by nature. Even without anyone to teach the child about anything around them, *inquisitiveness* is natural to a child and one of the first steps in the process of learning.

As mentioned in the sections above, the Gurukula system came into being for creating a learning environment for the learners – to reignite their keenness, eagerness and inquisitiveness to learn. This was only possible because inquisitiveness is an essential part of human nature. Born with free will, people from all around have the capacity to learn – as much as they wish to.

Swami Vivekananda explains that concentration is the key learning. and concentration is only the responsibility and function of an individual. Therefore, no matter the abundance or lack in the availability of resources, if the zeal to learn is there in the learner, learning will take place.

The quality and quantity of how much one learns is yet again dependent on the inner characteristics and qualities of an individual itself. Irrespective of the field in which the individual strives to learn, the responsibility of learning is on the learner. And for true learning to take place, the learner must possess certain qualities that push them towards learning. Ancient India has seen a plethora of dedicated learners. Defying time and age, Nachiketa from the Kathopanishad, in the realms beyond death, has established and inspired people that learning can take place anywhere and anytime, only if the person is willing to learn.

Following are the qualities of an ideal learner that have been extracted from the analysis of the Arthashastra, the Vimanasthana from Charaka Samhita in Ayurveda, understanding the views of Swami Vivekananda on the qualities a learner must possess for learning to take place and finally extracting the qualities of the young learner Nachiketa from the Kathopanishad.

Qualities of a Learner from Ancient India

काकचेष्टा बकध्यानम्, श्वाननिद्रा तथैव च ।

अल्पाहारी गृहत्यागी, विद्यार्थी पंचलक्षणम् ॥

‘A student should put efforts as a crow, have the concentration of a crane, sleep like a dog, have food moderately, stay away from home. These are the five qualities of a student’.

In this shloka, the five major qualities of a learner have been stated by giving different examples and analogies of the qualities of animals and choices.

As the popular story of the crow and the pot goes, where the crow tries persistently to drink water from the pot by throwing stones inside, until the water rises up, the first quality of a student is of persistence. Most learners start with all the zeal and enthusiasm they can muster, however, in due course of time, the levels of enthusiasm start decreasing. But a student must be persistent in their learning process, otherwise no true can take place.

Likewise, a student should also have the one-pointed concentration of a crane hunting for its prey, should sleep lightly like an alert dog, should have moderate amount of food – not too less to make them restless, neither too much to make them lazy and lethargic. Finally, the student must also have a sense of detachment from their comfort zones and strive to go higher.

The qualities that a learner must possess was given much importance as it was believed that as much as was the duty of the teacher to teach, more was the responsibility of the student in the process of learning. The learners would learn from everything around them. Guru Dattatreya, son of Rishi Atri and Anasuya explained that he has 24 Gurus in total that included – the earth, water, air, moon, sun, pigeon, and so on. He learnt from everything around him and explained that nature is the best teacher. However, as Swami Vivekananda terms learning as ‘uncovering’, it is only a capable and genuine student who can see the uncovering of nature and knowledge around them and facilitate their own learning process.

Ancient India has seen many such dedicated learners, who continued their strive for knowledge irrespective of their age or circumstances- and that is when Knowledge unfolded itself on them. An example of such learners is Nachiketa from the Kathopanishad.

The Eight Qualities of a Disciple from the Arthashastra

“A science imparts discipline to one, whose intellect has (the qualities of)-

- the desire to learn,
- listening,
- learning,
- retention,
- thorough understanding,
- reflection,
- rejection (of false views) and
- intentness on truth”.

(R.P. Kangle, 2000).

The Arthashastra speaks of eight qualities of a student. The qualities mentioned by Chanakya revolve around the different facets of the intellect. Chanakya focuses on the development and correct usage of the intellect as the means to learn – with constant analysis, dedication, and contemplation.

Reflection has been mentioned even ages ago in the Upanishads and other texts of ancient India. It was believed that true learning can only take place when an individual is completely involved in the learning process and puts in self effort. Even after the formal sessions of training and learning, only if the learners contemplate and reflect on what they have learnt, the concept, training and understanding of the learning can be deeply rooted.

In an organization, continuous learning and reflective learning are most essential as an organization goes through constant change. It is best for the employees to engage in reflective learning as it will not only help them increase their skills and tackle constant change, but will also help them look back into their learning journey and understand their experience to the fullest. That will help them prepare well for similar situations and cultivate an inner culture of contemplative learning.

Characteristics of an Ideal Student from the Vimanasthana, Charaka Samhita (Ayurveda)

अथाध्यापनविधिः-

अध्यापने कृतबुद्धिराचार्यः शिष्यमेवादितः परीक्षेत; तद्यथा-
 प्रशान्तमार्यप्रकृतिकमक्षुद्रकर्माणमृजुचक्षुर्मुखनासावंशं
 तनुरक्तविशदजिह्वमविकृतदन्तौष्ठमभिन्निनं
 धृतिमन्तमनहङ्कृतं मेधाविनं वितर्कस्मृतिसम्पन्नमुदारसत्त्वं
 तद्विद्यकुलजमथवा तद्विद्यवृत्तं तत्त्वाभिनिवेशिनमव्यङ्गमव्यापत्रेन्द्रियं
 निभृतमनुद्धतमर्थतत्त्वभावकमकोपनमव्यसनिनं
 शीलशौचाचारानुरागदाक्ष्यप्रादक्षिण्योपपन्नमध्ययनाभिकाममर्थविज्ञाने
 कर्मदर्शने चानन्यकार्यमलुब्धमनलसं सर्वभूतहितैषिणमाचार्यसर्वानुशिष्टिप्रतिकरमनुरक्तं च,
 एवङ्गुणसमुदितमध्याप्यमाहुः॥८॥

“Now following is the method of teaching: The teacher, having decided to teach should, first of all examine the **ideal disciple with following characteristics**:

- *should be very calm, with superior qualities,*
- *not involved in mean acts,*
- *with straight eyes, mouth, and nasal edge (without any defect in eyes, nose and mouth);*
- *having thin, red, and clear tongue; with no abnormality in teeth and lips, not talking with nasal utterance,*
- *having forbearance, without vanity, intelligent, endowed with logical reasoning and memory,*
- *broad minded,*
- *born in a family of physicians or aware with the conduct and behaviour of physicians*
- *desirous of gaining scientific knowledge*
- *without any physical deformity or disability of senses,*
- *humble, keeping the knowledge safely, un-haughty,*
- *having capacity to comprehend essence of the ideas,*
- *without anger and addictions,*
- *endowed with modesty, purity, good conduct, affection, dexterity, and sincerity, interested in study,*
- *dedicated to comprehension of ideas and practical knowledge without any distraction,*
- *having no greed or idleness, empathetic to all creatures,*
- *following all the instructions of the teacher and being attached to his teacher.” [8]*

An ideal student in the Vimana Sthana of the Charaka Samhita is described as one who is balanced in all aspects of life. A health mind and body are the determinant of a healthy individual. Only when there is outer as well as inner balance can knowledge endow upon the learner. Above is an exhaustive list of characteristics that must be present in the student of Ayurveda as per the text. However, the qualities mentioned above are essential for any learner to possess in order to tread on the path of learning – learning completely.

Psychological Characteristics	Behavioural Characteristics	Physical Characteristics
Calm	No indulgence in mean acts	Healthy eyes
Empathetic	Good conduct	Healthy nasal edge

No vanity	Aware and follows the conduct (of physicians)	Healthy mouth (thin red clear tongue, no abnormality in teeth and lips)
Intelligent	Without addictions	No talking with nasal utterance
Endowed with logical reasoning	Follow instructions of the teacher	Without physical deformity
Broad-minded	Dexterity	Without disability of the senses
Desire for gaining knowledge	Without idleness	
Keeping the knowledge safely		
Dedication		
Capacity to comprehend essence of ideas		
Sincerity		
Modesty		
Purity		
Affection		
Without anger		
Interest in learning		
Without greed		
Un-haughty		

Humble	
Forbearance	

Table 1: The qualities of a learner as mentioned in the Vimanasthana of the Charaka Samhita, categorized into psychological, behavioural and physical characteristics.

The above-mentioned characteristics have been classified into Psychological, Behavioural and Physical balance that ideally should be there in a learner for minimizing distractions of the body and the mind and facilitate the learner in the learning process.

The Views of Swami Vivekananda - Concentration is the Key to Learning

“to me, the very essence of education is concentration of the mind, not collecting of facts. If I had done my education over again and had my voice in the matter, I would not study all facts. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment and then with the perfect instrument, I could collect all facts at will”.

As propounded by Swami Vivekananda, *concentration* is the best and the only method to attain knowledge. Concentration powers the mind and brings it to focus. He says that from the lowest of man to the highest of Yogi needs concentration to gain knowledge, and when such concentration is applied, the object of learning unveils its secrets to the learner on its own.

Learning therefore is the responsibility of the learner, as it is only in the hands of the learner to be able to concentrate and retain the attention. Concentration should be trained to such a level that it also should be flexible enough that the learner should be able to detach the mind at a moment’s notice and place it upon something else, with unwavering concentration. Concentration is the ability of the mind; therefore, it can only be cultivated by the individual learner themselves.

Vivekananda also emphasizes the need to practice Brahmacharya and Rajayoga in order to increase concentration. He describes Brahmacharya as the purity of thought, deed, and action. Brahmacharya helps improve and sharpen many psychological processes such as remembering, learning, thinking, etc. It takes care of all possible distractions and prepares the mind and body to become effective means of knowledge.

The Cittabhumi Theory

The concept of Cittabhumi originally arises from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, however they have been described in Vyasa’s commentary of the Yoga Sutras. Vyasa describes the five states/ planes in which the mind can exist depending upon the dominance of the Tgunas namely – Sattva (purity), Rajas (action) and Tamas (inertia). A learner is advised to at least transcend the first three planes of the mind and be in the last two planes. The third one is still better than the first two that originate from Tamas and Rajas.

Following are the five planes in which the mind can exist –

Mudha – this is the state in which the mind is unable to focus or concentrate on anything. It is the dullest state of the mind where no new knowledge is learnt. This state of the mind is dominated by the guna of Tamas.

Kshipta – also known as the disturbed state of the mind or the butterfly state, the mind keeps fluctuating onto different things, with very little focus on one subject. Here, there is a dominance of Rajas that makes the mind engage in action and does not allow it to focus on a particular thing for long. There is anxiety and restlessness when one is in the *kshipta* plane of the mind. There is intense desire for outward objects and due to the presence of the Tamo guna as well. The chitta is always in pursuit of happiness and even though it dwells in five *vishayas* – *shabda* (sound), *sparsha* (touch), *roopa* (form), *rasa* (taste) and *gandha* (smell), its desire is still insatiable (Gulshan, 2022).

Vikshipta – also known as the distracted state of mind, the dominance of Rajas makes the mind distracted easily, however the mind here has the capability to be steady for sometime due to the presence of Sattva as well. However, this can be considered as the first step in the path to achieve full, undying concentration – that the mind is capable of.

Ekagra – this state is known as the plane of the mind, where the mind has achieved one-pointed awareness and concentration. Due to the predominance of the Sattva guna and the subdued nature of the Rajo and Tamo gunas, the mind majorly remains steady and unwavering. In this state, the mind stops wavering as the effect of *vruttis* stop due to the one-pointed concentration that the mind has now achieved.

Niruddha – the state of complete awareness, also known as the no-mind state where there are no thoughts in the mind of the individual. Complete cessation of all kinds of thought (*vrutti*) be it good or bad. The state when the observer *becomes one* with the object and there is nothing that can distract the learner.

Think about it
yourself!

Which plane do you think you
are in most of the time?

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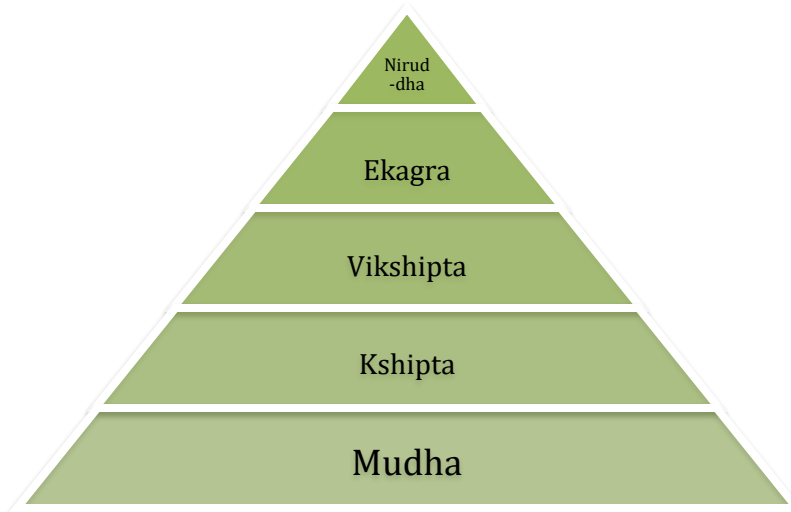


Fig. 2: The Cittabhumi Theory – Planes of the Mind

Complete concentration of the mind is what Swami Vivekananda speaks of as the only method of learning that can truly make one learn. And this is only possible by the learner themselves as concentration arises from within. It is also in the hands of the learner only to maintain and sustain this concentration and rise above the lower planes of the mind.

However, as constantly mentioned through the above texts such as the Viamanasthana of the Charaka Samhita, the first and foremost factor is the *interest* of the learner to truly learn.

Learning therefore, is the responsibility of the learner, where the learner is the one responsible for the quality and quantity of all that they learn. External methods can only facilitate the process of learning and help the learner with techniques to make the process consume less time. However, apart from all the methods that are used to learn, one can truly learn only when one is willing to.

The Epitome of an Ideal Learner – *Nachiketa*: The Student of Death

The Kathopanishad is one of the most well-known Upanishads of all. It all starts with King Vajasravasa performing a yagna and giving away old cows as gifts, where his young prince notices the happening and questions his father, ‘Who would you give me to father?’. After questioning constantly, the father – enraged – tells him that he would give him to Death. And this is where the dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa begins; the dialogue between a young inquisitive, dedicated learner and the God of Death.

The story is so well known due to the portrayal of a seeker in a young boy, who exhibits remarkable qualities of a learner that made him unafraid of the most feared of all – Death. Yama himself acknowledges these qualities of Nachiketa and shares with him his happiness and wish to receive students only like him for knowledge, as he is a true seeker – a true learner. This Upanishad also talks about many other facets of spiritual knowledge and though is concise, reveals a lot to the reader.

Following are certain characteristics of Nachiketa that have identified to make him one of the best role models for any learner and inherit the qualities of one who could even question Death and was determined to know what he wanted to know.

नैषा तर्केण मतिरापनेया प्रोक्तान्येनैव सुज्ञानाय प्रेष्ठ ।

यां त्वमापः सत्यधृतिर्बतासि त्वाद्दृ नो भूयान्नचिकेतः प्रष्टा ॥ 1.9 ॥

*This wisdom is not to be had by reasoning, O beloved Nachiketas; only when told thee by another it brings real knowledge, — the wisdom which thou hast gotten. Truly thou art **steadfast** in the Truth! Even such a questioner as thou art may I meet with always.*

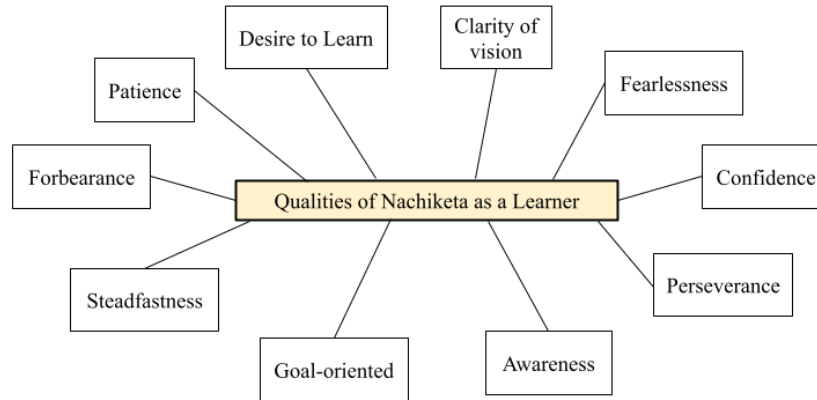
The reason why Nachiketa had so much **confidence** and **fearlessness** were because of his **clarity of vision**. True confidence and **bravery** can only come when one does not doubt oneself – and that only comes when the mind is clear of its modulations and has crystal clear clarity. The goals are known, the steps are clear, the **forbearance** for the consequences is also there as there is no expectation of the outcome.

Even after Yama showering all the worldly pleasures he can on Nachiketa, the young seeker was aware of the transitory nature of these and the consequence of how they merely drain the senses. But he had the **desire to learn** and that is the very first step in the process of learning.

He strived to know the Higher Truth and that is reason why even the objects that drown the senses in lust, he was untainted. **Perseverance**, **dedication** and being completely **goal-oriented**, Nachiketa was able to convince even the God of Death for imparting what he came here to seek. Right from the beginning, it is said in the Kathopanishad that Nachiketa had to wait for 3 days outside the house of Yama without food and water as he was not there, yet he stood there waiting for Yama for as long as it takes.

The second step to learning therefore, is **patience**. Learning may not always take place in the expected pace or give immediate results, however a continuity in practice and patience is essential for the learning process to slowly take its time and seep in to the being of the learner.

It is said that knowledge is never transmitted from the speaker to the listener or the object to the subject automatically only because it is there to be studied. True knowledge in fact can be transmitted even in *silence*. And this can only happen when the mind of the individual is completely in tune with the teacher or the object of study. As Vivekananda puts it, learning is a process or *uncovering* and not *acquiring*. When the mind is cleared of all distractions and is either in the Ekagra or Niruddha planes (as mentioned above in the Cittabhumi theory), the mind tunes in to what it seeks and knows it.



The character of Nachiketa has been one of the most prominent characters when it comes to the depiction of an ideal student is because he carries the qualities that have been mentioned in a plethora of texts as what should be the qualities that a learner must possess in order to learn and gain knowledge.

Likewise, in this article, the qualities of a learner as mentioned in the Arthashastra and the Vimansthana from the Charaka Samhita as well as the views of Swami Vivekananda align with the characteristics and qualities possessed and exhibited by the young Nachiketa. He also never went below the last two stages of his Cittabhumi (remained in the planes of Ekagra and Niruddha throughout) and therefore, could completely understand even the subtlest of Truths in one conversation.

Knowledge reveals itself to those who seek truly.

Conclusion

Learning is an evitable part of life. There is a need in most cases and a desire to learn more as well. Irrespective of the intention behind learning, the process itself is essential in shaping human beings into what they gather from their experiences. Human beings are involved in complex structures – interpersonal relationships, playing various roles in life – learning makes them understand and grow throughout the process called – Life.

The Indian Knowledge Systems emphasize on the qualities of that one must possess as a learner, as most of the learning happens when one is willing to learn. Various texts as mentioned in the article above have explained what kind of qualities and temperaments one should have in order to indulge oneself fully into the process of learning.

One of the most complex structures is an organization where countless people are meant to interact every day, come up with new ideas, play their roles, and go through constant change. For the success of an organization, therefore, having a set of flexible and quick learners as employees is much more essential than having a set of highly skilled employees who would not be able to adapt to change or come out of their rigid structures.

Therefore, it would be ideal for organizations to apply the same starting from the levels of employee recruitment itself, where the selection of employees would also be based on whether the candidate has the qualities of a learner or not. This would ensure a thorough selection of employees because of the flexibility in mindset as well the abilities to adapt to change which would help organizations in the long run. It would also allow quick learning and application as well as help in the selection and forming of a vividly thinking and active group of employees that would quickly adapt to any change, such as merger-acquisition, that comes in their way.

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Background Notes

The Views of Sri Aurobindo - Learning is the responsibility of the Learner

Sri Aurobindo views on education and learning point to the facet of learning that depend upon the student/learner rather than the teacher or any external factor. He emphasizes on the fact that nothing can be taught to anyone. It is only the spontaneity and the urge for self-determination of the learner. He also emphasizes that the nature of the learner should be left free to expand in accordance to their own nature (*svadharma*). He also highlights the consequences of not allowing the learner to follow their *Svadharma* that completely mutilates the learner's growth and does 'permanent harm'. *It is selfish tyranny over a human soul and wound to the nation.*

Sri Aurobindo also accentuates the importance of self-experience by the learner and learning by doing. Just by knowing what needs to be done does not allow the learner the exposure they need to have a complete understanding of the subject. What might be justified and well established in theory, might not be well applicable when in practice. Therefore, for complete learning, the learner must engage in practical work and allow oneself to experience. Without self-experience, the learner would also not be acquainted to modify to changes spontaneously as well to be adaptable as the situation unfolds itself.

As organizations are in situations of constant change, if the employees are allowed to explore and experience the learning in practicality, then complete learning would take place, and it would also empower the learner to adapt to situations quickly and think efficiently when faced with similar or new situations in the future.

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Divyanandaprana, P., [VivekaVani]. (2018, November 14). *The story of Nachiketa ~Katha Upanishad // Pravrajika Divyanandaprana* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CArSkqw6D8&feature=youtu.be>

About: This video file consists of a talk by Pravrajika Divyanandaprana Mataji on the story of Nachiketa from the Kathopanishad and what qualities one can inherent from Nachiketa, especially in the context of learning and instilling the qualities of true seeker.

Gulshan. (2022, May 19). *Explanation on who elaborated on patanjali's chitta bhumis*. Yoga Q&A. <https://www.askyogaexpert.org/1922/explanation-on-who-elaborated-on-patanjalis-chitta-bhumis>

About: this site gives a detailed description of the Cittabhumi from Vyasa's commentary of the Yoga sutras with information on the related Trigunas as well.

Kangle, R.P. (2000). *The Kautilya Arthashastra. Part III*. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.

About: this book has a complete translation and interpretation of the Arthashastra written by Kautilya.