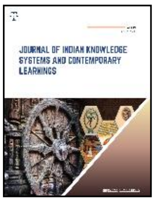
theJournals

Journal of Indian Knowledge Systems and Contemporary Learnings, e-ISSN: 3107-7722
July-December 2025 | Volume: 01, Issue: 02, Page No.: 30-40
https://doi.org/10.64006/iks/1204



ORIGINAL ARTICLE|Received:05th October. 2025 | Revised: 28th October. 2025 | Accepted: 20th November. 2025 | Published: 26th December. 2025

Kauṭilya, Gandhi, and Sustainable Development in Indian Economic Thought

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined whether Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra and M. K. Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship articulated a coherent logic of sustainable resource stewardship independently of the 1987 Brundtland Report and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals framework.

The study used a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative textual design. It read the translated Arthaśāstra and Gandhi's own writings on trusteeship alongside peer-reviewed economic-history scholarship, and mapped the resulting propositions against Elinor Ostrom's design principles for durable common-pool resource governance and against a documented case of Indian community irrigation institutions.

The analysis found that Kauṭilyan and Gandhian economic thought converged with Ostrom's principles and with the Sustainable Development Goals on three points: bounded stewardship of a shared resource base, restraint on accumulation, and accountability of power to the group that depended on the resource. The convergence was structural rather than a matter of direct historical influence, and it was strongest on welfare and weakest on ecological and user-governance dimensions.

The comparison offered Indian policymakers and educators a textually grounded, indigenous vocabulary for welfare-conditioned governance and responsible consumption that could complement, rather than replace, the internationally sourced Sustainable Development Goals framework.

This paper was, to the authors' knowledge, the first to read Kauṭilyan and Gandhian economic thought together against Ostrom's empirically derived design principles, extending recent Indian Knowledge Systems scholarship beyond single-tradition readings.

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Keywords: Arthaśāstra; Gandhian trusteeship; common-pool resources; sustainable development; Indian economic thought

INTRODUCTION

"Sustainable development" entered international policy vocabulary in 1987, when the World Commission on Environment and Development defined it as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). The United Nations carried this definition forward into the 2030 Agenda and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by 193 member states in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). Both documents are now the default reference point for any discussion of long-term resource stewardship, in India as much as anywhere else.

That default status has a cost. It treats a specific problem, how a society keeps a shared resource base intact across generations of use, without one generation's consumption foreclosing another's, as though it were a discovery of

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How to cite: Thakur, R., Singh, K., & Kumar, S. (2025). Kautilya, Gandhi, and sustainable development in Indian economic thought. *Journal of Indian Knowledge Systems and Contemporary Learnings*, *1*(2), 30–40. https://doi.org/10.64006/iks/1204

the late twentieth century. It was not. Societies that depended directly on land, water, and forest cover for survival had reason to think about exactly this problem long before "sustainable development" became a phrase, and some wrote their conclusions down. Two strands of Indian economic thought did so with unusual explicitness: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra, a fourth-century-BCE treatise on statecraft that made the durable welfare of the governed (yogakṣema) the stated purpose of economic policy (Kangle, 1972; Rangarajan, 1992), and M. K. Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship, which argued that wealth held by an individual is properly understood as held in trust for the community, not owned outright (Gandhi, 1947, 1960).

Indian economic historiography has examined each of these traditions closely on its own terms. Balbir Sihag's extended body of work situates Kauṭilya as a serious forerunner of modern economic analysis, arguing that the Arthaśāstra anticipates ideas later associated with institutional economics and public finance (Sihag, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2009). Amartya Sen has placed Kauṭilya inside a longer Indian tradition of public reasoning about governance (Sen, 2005). Gandhian trusteeship has its own substantial literature, most recently revisited as a possible resource for thinking about inequality and sustainability rather than only as a corporate-paternalism device (Chakrabarty, 2015; Dasgupta, 1996). What this literature does less often is read Kauṭilya and Gandhi together, and set both against the vocabulary institutional economics now uses for exactly the problem they were both addressing: how a group sustains a shared resource under conditions of competing individual claims on it. Elinor Ostrom's design principles for durable common-pool resource governance, developed from empirical study of irrigation systems, forests, and fisheries around the world, including in South India (Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988), offer a ready-made, empirically grounded vocabulary for that comparison.

This paper makes that comparison directly. It is not an argument that the SDGs derive from Kauṭilya or Gandhi, and it resists a temptation common enough in Indian Knowledge Systems writing: to claim that ancient India "already had" whatever the modern world later rediscovered. The more defensible claim is structural. Three lines of thought, working on the same underlying problem in different centuries and different idioms, converged on similar institutional answers. Their intersection is informative, so too is where the comparison strains, and the realpolitik at the heart of the Arthaśāstra is a genuine limitation, not a detail to be quietly set aside, which is instructive in its own right.

Research Questions

1. Do the Arthaśāstra's yogakṣema doctrine and Gandhi's trusteeship doctrine articulate a coherent account of sustainable resource stewardship prior to, and independent of, the Brundtland framework?

2. How do these two Indian frameworks compare structurally with Ostrom's design principles for durable common-pool resource governance, and with documented Indian collective-action institutions?

3. What does this comparison add to the vocabulary available for India's own sustainable-development policy discussion, beyond imported frameworks?

Objective

- To examine the economic-welfare content of the Arthaśāstra's yogakṣema doctrine and place it within the historiography of economic thought.
- To examine Gandhian trusteeship as a distributive and ecological ethic, not only as a corporate-responsibility idea.
- To build a comparative reading of Kauṭilyan and Gandhian propositions against Ostrom's design principles and the SDG framework, and to note where the comparison is strained.

METHODOLOGY

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This is a qualitative, interpretive study built on textual and comparative analysis, consistent with the methodological register of Indian Knowledge Systems scholarship generally. It does not use statistical or field methods and makes no claim to represent implementation empirically. Primary material consists of the translated Arthaśāstra (Kangle, 1972; Rangarajan, 1992) and Gandhi's own writings on trusteeship (Gandhi, 1947, 1960). Secondary material draws on peer-reviewed economic-history scholarship on Kauṭilya (Sihag, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2009; Borah, 2025), on Gandhian economic thought (Chakrabarty, 2015; Dasgupta, 1996), and on institutional economics of the commons (Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988), read against the United Nations' own sustainability documents (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987; United Nations, 2015). The comparative tables that follow are original syntheses built for this paper; they are conceptual mappings, not reproductions of data drawn from any single source, and every specific factual claim underlying them is traced to a cited source in the text.

Research Design and Type

This study followed a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative research design appropriate to historical and textual scholarship in Indian Knowledge Systems. It did not employ an empirical, survey-based, or experimental design, and its conclusions should be read as conceptual rather than as statistically generalisable findings.

Data Collection Procedure and Instrument

Data collection consisted of a close reading of the primary published translations of the Arthaśāstra (Kangle, 1972; Rangarajan, 1992) and of Gandhi's own writings on trusteeship (Gandhi, 1947, 1960), supplemented by a targeted review of peer-reviewed secondary literature on Kauṭilyan economics, Gandhian economic thought, and institutional economics of the commons. As a textual-comparative study, the paper used no survey instrument or measurement scale; the analytical instrument was the framework built from Ostrom's (1990) eight design principles for durable common-pool resource governance, applied consistently across the three strands of thought compared in Tables 1 to 3.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability in the conventional psychometric sense does not apply to a qualitative textual design of this kind. Trustworthiness was instead supported by triangulating each factual claim against at least one cited primary or peer-reviewed secondary source, as indicated throughout the text, and by explicitly marking, in Tables 1 to 3, the points at which a mapping across traditions was judged partial or strained rather than forcing an exact fit.

Sampling Framework and Size

The sample was purposive rather than probabilistic. It comprised the two classical Indian traditions named in the title and one documented empirical case (Wade's, 1988, study of South Indian irrigation institutions), selected because it is among the founding empirical cases in Ostrom's own commons literature and because it is set in India, allowing the comparison to close with documented practice rather than remain at the level of doctrine alone.

Time Period and Geographical Details

The material spans, in terms of date of composition, the fourth century BCE (the Arthaśāstra) to 2025 (the most recent secondary scholarship cited), and is geographically centered on the Indian subcontinent, with the Brundtland Report and the Sustainable Development Goals used as the internationally sourced comparator framework.

Ethical Considerations and Data Handling

The study used only previously published, publicly available textual material. It did not involve human participants, primary fieldwork, or personal data, and so did not require institutional ethical clearance. Source texts were read in their published English translations, and every specific factual claim was checked against its cited source before inclusion.

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Statistical Technique and Software

No statistical software was used, consistent with the qualitative design; the textual and comparative analysis was conducted manually, and the comparative tables were built as original conceptual syntheses rather than as outputs of a statistical procedure.

Hypotheses

This study did not test formal hypotheses. Given its qualitative, interpretive, and comparative design, no null (H0) or alternate (Ha) hypotheses were formulated or reported; the Research Questions and Objective above serve the equivalent function of directing the analysis.

Sustainable Development's Contested Genealogy

The Brundtland Report's definition rests on two moves: fixing "needs" as the unit of concern rather than wants or preferences, and making the claims of a future, currently non-existent generation binding on a present one (WCED, 1987). The 2030 Agenda operationalized this through seventeen goals and 169 targets, spanning poverty, hunger, health, decent work, and the health of ecosystems on land and at sea (United Nations, 2015). Subsequent United Nations discussion has tried to sharpen the intergenerational-equity content of the Agenda, noting that "future generations" appears only a handful of times in the founding text and that no goal or target refers to it explicitly (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination [UNSCEB], 2023). That gap is worth noting here because it is precisely the gap that a comparison with older traditions of resource stewardship can help fill: both Kauṭilyan and Gandhian economics build intergenerational obligation into the structure of the argument rather than treating it as an addition.

It is also worth being honest about what a comparison like this cannot do. This is not what Kauṭilya was writing about and this is not what Gandhi was writing about. The direct anticipation of the SDGs by reading either text will run the danger of the type of anachronic emptiness that deprives both texts of their own content. The analogy that is tried here is more limited: it poses the question of whether the institutional logic by which each tradition defends a common resource base (bounding consumption, making the legitimacy of power dependent on the well-being of the group, building in restraint) is similar to the logic that institutional economics has since come to discover on its own. A structural similarity assertion, not an influence or precedence assertion.

Kauṭilyan Economics: Yogakṣema as an Early Welfare Logic

The compilation of the Arthaśāstra around the fourth century BCE, attributed to Kauṭilya (Chanakya), chief minister of the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta, is mainly a guide to the art of statecraft: it discusses the education of princes, the organization of ministries, civil and criminal law, and foreign policy as well as a detailed account of taxation, regulation of trade and the finances of the state (Kangle, 1972; Rangarajan, 1992). The purpose it serves, which is repeated throughout the text, is yogakṣema which means the welfare and security of the subject population, to be secured through fair trade, quality control, and the disciplined use of taxation.

It is not a gilded word. A careful reading of the text as done by Sihag, reveals the concrete mechanisms that Kauṭilya built around it: fines on merchants who adulterate the goods or lie about their quality, regulation of prices based on the need to avoid profit-taking by merchants in times of famine, a taxation system justified by the fact that it should not impoverish the taxed (Sihag, 2005a). Sihag (2007) extends this point to state that the interdependence of institutions, governance, ethics and economic growth in Kauṭilya proposes propositions that would only be proposed in the twentieth century by the institutional economics field: that growth is not just a product of resource endowment, but of the quality of governance and the plausibility of rules over time. The recent review by Borah (2025) further mentions that Kauṭilya established fixed profit rates on traders, instructed the state to hoard reserves and to prepare to relieve famine, as well as to support orphans, widows and the destitute. These are clauses which make state legitimacy directly dependent on the proven results of welfare instead of conquest or revenue per se. Amartya Sen places the Arthaśāstra within a wider Indian tradition of shared reasoning about the legitimacy of state power, alongside the edicts of Ashoka three centuries later, on the ground that both writers conditioned a ruler's legitimacy on taking the welfare of the ruled into account (Sen, 2005). Recent scholarship has continued to press this reading of the Arthaśāstra's welfare content into contemporary development-policy terms, arguing that its taxation, infrastructure, and public-welfare provisions correspond closely to present-day development-economics priorities (Kerwal, 2026), and that its emphasis on ethical, welfare-oriented governance offers a culturally grounded framework for aligning Indian economic thought with Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work and inclusive growth (Agarwal & Kumar, 2026).

The conditionality as such is the sustainability-relevant content of this. The legitimacy of a ruler in this context does not exist independently; but is based on the state evidently maintaining, not exhausting, the material foundation of the welfare of the population. Table 1 scans this content on the three planes of sustainability that the Brundtland model and its descendants generally differentiate (economic, social, and environmental), with the third of them being the least well-fit. The Arthaśāstra tells a good deal about forests, water tanks and mines as sources of revenue, to be regulated by the state (Rangarajan, 1992), but its interest in these is fiscal and administrative, not ecological as we understand the term; to infer an environmental ethic in the passages would be overstated.

Table 1: ***Kauṭilya's Yogakṣema Doctrine Read Against the Three Conventional Dimensions of Sustainability***

Dimension	**Arthaśāstra Provision**	**Basis**
Economic	Fixed profit margins on trade, rules against hoarding and speculation, taxation tied to ability to pay	Sihag (2005a, 2005b); Rangarajan (1992)
Social	State-mandated relief for orphans, widows, the elderly, and the destitute; stockpiled reserves and relief measures against famine	Rangarajan (1992); Borah (2025)
Environmental (qualified)	State regulation of forests, mines, and water tanks as revenue assets; concern is fiscal and administrative, not ecological in the modern sense	Rangarajan (1992); Kangle (1972)

Note. Author's synthesis based on the cited sources.

A frank limitation of this reading is that the Arthaśāstra is, first and foremost, also a guide to realpolitik. It endorses espionage, secret action against other states, and judicious fraud as common tools of statecraft, it tolerates social gradation and autocratic government as natural attributes of its social world; and subsequent commentators have accordingly understood it as a predecessor to Machiavelli as well as to any welfare economics (Borah, 2025). The re-evaluation of Borah (2025) holds that the welfare and the coldly instrumental interpretations of the text are not two sides of the same coin that should be resolved but two sides of the same document, and that the welfare content of the text should not be disaggregated and analyzed in isolation of the rest. This paper considers that as a real limitation on the comparison, not as a fact about the real value of people or of ecosystems, and should not be adorned like a swan.

Gandhian Trusteeship: Restraint as an Economic and Ecological Ethic

The response of Gandhi to a smaller variant of same issue that Kauṭilya discusses on the level of the state is trusteeship: what prevents the rich to drain the entire pool of a common resource foundation in their own lifespan? The satisfaction of this question, which Gandhi had worked out over decades of writing, was that wealth beyond personal need is not a personal possession in the usual sense; the possession of it is a trust, to be used on behalf of the society, and judged by this criterion (Gandhi, 1947, 1960). This is greater than a call to charity. Gandhi did not invite the rich to make voluntary contributions of a portion of their excess as an act of benevolence: he maintained that the excess was never, in any case, their property, and that a trustee who squandered it on his own accumulation was doing a duty, not a charity.

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The idea of trusteeship was reviewed by Bidyut Chakrabarty in Modern Asian Studies and dates the idea of trusteeship to the very involvement of Gandhi with Ruskin and Carnegie and interprets it as a tool Gandhi employed to entangle India's business houses in the nationalist movement, but tie them to an ethos of social good more than economic gain; Chakrabarty also interprets trusteeship as a precursor to the modern concept of corporate social responsibility, predating a post-hoc interpretation of his work (Chakrabarty, 2015). The analysis of the economics of Gandhi by Ajit Dasgupta puts this in a broader context of criticism: it was not just that Gandhi objected to consumption on the basis of need, but also that he objected to the production processes, which were resource-intensive, mechanized, and which had to be produced by a process of consumption (Dasgupta, 1996). Read jointly, trusteeship does not represent a redistribution system as such; it is a constraint on the amount of a common resource-base which any one actor is allowed to consume which is functionally equivalent to what sustainability economics refers to as a consumption ceiling. This reading has been reinforced in recent work that returns to Gandhi's own writings to argue that trusteeship organizes an economic order around social necessities and the removal of inequality rather than around ownership as such, and that this makes it a live resource for present-day sustainable-development thinking rather than a historical curiosity (Deka, 2025). The diluted, corporate form that trusteeship has taken in contemporary practice is visible in empirical studies of Indian firms, where corporate social responsibility spending has been found to bear a measurable, if partial, relationship to financial performance, consistent with Chakrabarty's (2015) reading of trusteeship as a precursor to that later, narrower practice (Joselin et al., 2025).

The comparison with Kauṭilya is instructive here because the two traditions locate the constraint in different places. Kauṭilya constrains the ruler: legitimacy is conditional on the ruler sustaining the population's welfare, and the constraint operates through the threat of instability if the ruler fails. Gandhi constrains the individual holder of wealth directly, without routing the obligation through the state at all; trusteeship is meant to work even where, or especially where, state enforcement is weak or absent. The two are not competing accounts of the same mechanism. They are answers to the same underlying question, who is entitled to draw down a shared resource and on what condition, applied at two different levels of the same economy.

Convergence with Common-Pool Resource Governance

Both traditions discussed so far have been read from texts. Ostrom's design principles for durable common-pool resource governance were built the other way, from field observation of resource-user groups that had sustained forests, fisheries, and irrigation systems, in some cases for centuries, without either privatizing the resource or losing it to overuse (Ostrom, 1990). Her eight principles (clearly defined group and resource boundaries, rules matched to local conditions, participation of users in rule-making, monitoring, graduated sanctions, accessible conflict resolution, a recognized right to organize, and, for larger systems, nested layers of governance) describe the conditions under which a resource-user group avoids depleting what it shares (Ostrom, 1990).

One of the original empirical cases behind this literature is Indian. Robert Wade's study of village-level irrigation institutions in South India, published as Village Republics two years before Ostrom's book, documents how farmer groups dependent on a shared tank or canal system built their own rules for water allocation, monitoring, and sanctioning free-riders, achieving outcomes that outperformed comparable state-managed systems nearby (Wade, 1988). The cases of Wade are not based on either the Kauṭilyan or the Gandhian doctrine, but are modern institutions, which are directly observed. Their relevance here is that they show the same structural logic (bounded access, locally enforced restraint, and accountability running to the group rather than to an external authority) appearing in Indian practice independent of either classical or Gandhian text, which weakens any suggestion that this logic is peculiar to a doctrine rather than a durable response to a shared problem.

Table 2 sets the three frameworks side by side against Ostrom's eight principles. The mapping is not exact, and the table marks that explicitly rather than forcing a fit: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra addresses state-level resource administration and has little to say about user self-governance in Ostrom's sense, since rule-making generally stays with the crown rather than passing to resource users. Gandhian trusteeship is closer in spirit to Ostrom's user-centered model but was never developed into the kind of operational rule-system Ostrom documents in the field. Only Wade's cases satisfy Ostrom's principles in the fullest sense, because they are the only one of the three that consists of documented institutions rather than doctrine.

Table 2: ***Ostrom's Design Principles Compared with Kauṭilyan, Gandhian, and Documented Indian Institutional Practice***

Ostrom's Design Principle	**Kauṭilyan Arthaśāstra**	**Gandhian Trusteeship**	**Wade's South Indian Irrigation Institutions**
Clearly defined boundaries	Set by administrative fiat of the crown	Not specified	Set by the user community itself
Congruence with local conditions	Largely uniform rules across the empire	Universal moral principle, not localized	Rules matched to local tank and canal conditions
User participation in rule-making	Absent; rules set by the crown	Absent; an individual ethical commitment, not a group process	Present; farmers set their own allocation rules
Monitoring	State-appointed officials and informants	Absent	Present; farmer-monitors
Graduated sanctions	Fines and punishment set by the state	Absent	Present; locally administered
Conflict-resolution mechanisms	Royal courts	Absent	Present; local dispute mechanisms
Recognized right to organize	Not applicable; state-centered	Not applicable	Present, informally recognized
Nested enterprises for larger systems	Present, as a layered administrative hierarchy	Absent	Present in multi-village systems

Note. Author's synthesis based on Ostrom (1990), Kangle (1972), Rangarajan (1992), Gandhi (1947, 1960), and Wade (1988).

This qualification matters more than the mapping itself. It would be easy to overstate the convergence, to present Kauṭilya, Gandhi, and Ostrom as three routes to the same discovery, and the temptation is strongest exactly where the case for Indian economic thought's originality is being made. The more accurate statement is narrower: all three converge on the idea that a shared resource base survives only when access to it is bounded and when the party drawing on it answers to some collective, but they differ sharply on who does the bounding, how the answering is enforced, and at what scale. That difference is not a flaw in the comparison. It is the comparison's most useful finding, because it tells a policymaker where a classical or Gandhian framing can do real institutional work and where it cannot.

Toward an Integrated Reading: Mapping to the Sustainable Development Goals

Table 3 draws the strands together against the SDG architecture, restricted to the goals for which a textual or documented basis exists in the material reviewed above; goals with no plausible connection to either tradition are left out rather than forced in. Kauṭilya's welfare-conditioned legitimacy maps most directly onto SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), given the Arthaśāstra's explicit provisions for famine relief, price regulation, and accountable administration (Sihag, 2005a, 2007; Borah, 2025). Gandhian trusteeship maps onto SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and, more tentatively, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), through its restraint on accumulation and its argument that consumption should be bounded by need rather than by capacity to pay (Dasgupta, 1996; Chakrabarty, 2015). Wade's documented irrigation institutions, read through Ostrom's design principles, map onto SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), since both concern the durable management of a physical shared resource by its users (Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988).

Table 3: ***Mapping Strands of Indian Economic Thought to Relevant Sustainable Development Goals***

Strand of Thought	Relevant SDG(s)	Basis
Kauṭilyan yogakṣema	SDG 1 – No Poverty; SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Sihag (2005a, 2007); Borah (2025)
Gandhian trusteeship	SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities; SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production (qualified)	Dasgupta (1996); Chakrabarty (2015)
Ostrom–Wade convergence	SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 15 – Life on Land	Ostrom (1990); Wade (1988)

Note. Author's synthesis based on United Nations (2015) and the sources listed in the third column.

The rationale behind this table is not to say that Indian economic thought is more or less comprehensive of the SDGs, which would be a far bigger and more unprovable assertion. It is to demonstrate that insofar as there is a solemn textual or empirical foundation, the relationship is particular, as opposed to a question of vaguely-stated similarity. Climate action (SDG 13) and the ocean-related goal (SDG 14) are conspicuously absent from the table. Nothing in Kauṭilya, Gandhi, or Wade's cases speaks to either with any precision, and including them would have meant stretching the material past what it will bear. A comparison of this kind is only useful if it is willing to leave gaps where gaps exist.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

For India's own sustainability-policy discourse, the practical value of this comparison is more modest than a rhetorical claim that “India already had the SDGs” would suggest, and more useful for exactly that reason. The National Education Policy 2020 already calls for Indian Knowledge Systems to be taught alongside, not instead of, standard curricula, and identifies conservation and traditional resource management as legitimate areas of study (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The material reviewed here supports that framing at the level of economic thought specifically: it gives policymakers and educators textual and documented grounding, not folklore, not assertion, for treating Indian economic tradition as a source of genuine institutional ideas about resource stewardship, alongside, rather than as a substitute for, the international sustainability literature. Recent work on integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into pedagogy under this same policy makes a parallel argument at the level of curriculum design, treating indigenous frameworks as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, standard disciplinary content (Asagar, 2025), the present paper makes the equivalent argument at the level of economic-policy vocabulary. The practical stakes of a home-grown welfare vocabulary are not only historical: contemporary evaluations of welfare-oriented Indian financial institutions, such as interest-free microfinance, continue to find them comparatively efficient at serving low-income users, which suggests that yogakṣema-style thinking about bounding extraction in the interest of the served population still has measurable purchase in Indian economic practice today (Ummer Farooque & Ranjan, 2025).

Three implications follow. The welfare-conditioned legitimacy of Kauṭilya's statecraft, first, provides a home-grown set of vocabulary to present the argument that the legitimacy of a state to rule is based on its provable status in the management of common resources, a normative argument which does not necessarily have to be imported by the Brundtland Report to be enacted in an Indian policy setting on the strength of imported authority alone.

Second, Gandhian trusteeship supplies a parallel, if less institutionalized, vocabulary of restraint: it recasts responsible consumption not as an externally imposed sacrifice but as a moral obligation already embedded in

Indian economic thought, available for policy communication on sustainable consumption without translation into imported ethical categories.

Third, because both traditions converge independently with Ostrom's empirically derived design principles for durable common-pool resource governance, the comparison licenses treating those principles as a diagnostic checklist for specific Indian resource institutions, rather than leaving Indian Knowledge Systems as historical ornamentation in policy documents whose operative content is imported wholesale.

All this is not licensure of blind passion. The realpolitik essence of Kauṭilya, the embrace of the caste hierarchy, and the happy acceptance of autocratic government are not accidental characteristics that can be deleted and the welfare content saved, but they belong to the same text, and the wisdom of considering the welfare content as editable content would reduce a serious comparison to selective quotation (Borah, 2025). Gandhian trusteeship, in its turn, has never been scaled and, as per the evidence that will be examined in this paper, is more of a moral plea than an institutional structure. What the comparison adds in value is to recognize what aspects of each tradition can and cannot work in a contemporary policy context.

Limitations of the Study

This paper is a textual, interpretive and comparative exercise and not an empirical study of implementation and its conclusions should be interpreted as such. It has three restrictions that can be mentioned.

• The reading presented of the Arthaśāstra used here is based on the translations of Kangle and Rangarajan and the secondary literature based on those, and does not entail a reading of the Sanskrit text itself, and the choices made in translation will always influence what a comparative reading can discover.

• The comparison risks selection bias: sources that support convergence with sustainability thinking were easier to find than sources that test it, because the secondary literature on Kauṭilya and Gandhi is itself weighted toward finding contemporary relevance.

• Wade's cases are decades old and specific to South Indian tank irrigation; whether comparable institutions persist, or persisted, in other Indian regions and resource types is a question this paper does not answer and would require separate field-based research.

CONCLUSION

Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra and Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship were not written to solve the problem the Brundtland Report set out in 1987, and reading them as though they were would flatten both texts. What this paper has tried to show instead is narrower, and hopefully more durable: that both traditions worked out, in their own idiom and for their own purposes, an institutional logic (bounded access to a shared resource, restraint on the party drawing on it, and accountability running to a collective rather than to the individual alone) that institutional economics later arrived at independently through Ostrom's empirical study of common-pool resources, including in documented Indian cases such as Wade's South Indian irrigation systems. The convergence is real but partial, and the gaps are as informative as the overlaps: Kauṭilya's statism, Gandhi's lack of operational detail, and the absence of any classical or Gandhian material bearing on climate or ocean governance all mark limits on how far this comparison can be pushed. Within these parameters, Indian economic thinking provides an immensely useful, domestically based vocabulary to the sustainability policy debates in India, not to replace the SDG framework but rather as a complementary resource that should be considered on its own merits.

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS
CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT / AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Rupesh Thakur: Conceptualization, literature review, textual analysis, manuscript drafting, and revision.
Karam Singh: Supervision, critical review.
Shashi Kumar: Review & Editing.

Acknowledgment: The authors would like to state that no specific funding or support was received for this study.

Conflict of interest: The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

AI statement: AI tools were used for language refinement and as an editorial assistant during manuscript assistance.

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How to cite: Thakur, R., Singh, K., & Kumar, S. (2025). Kautilya, Gandhi, and sustainable development in Indian economic thought. *Journal of Indian Knowledge Systems and Contemporary Learnings*, *1*(2), 30–40. https://doi.org/10.64006/iks/1204