

Bengal's lamp of culture needs the oil of wealth

# The Artha Shastra

AMISH

There are some cities we pass through in life. And then there are some that quietly claim a part of our soul.

For me, Calcutta will always be the latter.

I first came to this city as a student at IIM Calcutta in Joka; a young man from a family with deep roots in Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh — ancient Kashi, one of the spiritual hearts of our civilisation. By identity, I was a *baharigato* in Bengal. And yet, in a way that Calcutta has always managed so well, the city drew me in, with its warmth, its intellect, its quiet self-assurance.

There is something deeply distinctive about Bengali culture. A certain grace. A comfort with ideas. A love for debate, for literature, for music. Among the *bhadralok*, I found not just friends but kindred spirits; people who could argue fiercely over philosophy and then laugh together over *cha* minutes later.

And yet, there has always been a small, ironic smile in my heart at the idea of being called an 'outsider'.

After all, my father's home state — Uttar Pradesh — once elected the first woman chief minister of Bengali origin anywhere in India: Sucheta Majumdar Kripalani, in 1963. There was no hesitation in UP about origins, no discomfort with identity. India, at its best, has always been expansive, generous, and inclusive.

This article, however, is not about politics. Politicians come and go; they reflect the choices and the priorities of the people who elect them. This is, instead, a quiet conversation; one that I hope to have with a city and a culture I deeply love.

There was a time when Calcutta stood as one of the great economic pillars of India. In the 1950s and the 1960s, three cities dominated industrial India: Bombay, Calcutta, and Kanpur. They were the engines of growth, the centres where ambition found expression.

And then, history took different turns.

Kanpur and Calcutta, for a variety of reasons — but significantly influenced by anti-business and overly rigid ideological frameworks rooted in communism — began to lose their economic edge. Industries declined. Investment slowed. Opportunities thinned.

Bombay, now Mumbai, on the other hand, chose a different path. It embraced wealth creation, enter-



prise, and risk-taking with even more gusto. And in doing so, it did not merely survive — it surged ahead, becoming arguably India's most dominant economic city.

What is perhaps even more striking is what followed.

Cities that were once considered relatively secondary — Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, and even Delhi — have risen dramatically over the past few decades. They invested in growth, in industry, in innovation. And today, they stand among India's foremost economic powerhouses.

Chanakya, the great thinker, had said: "*Sukhasya mulam dharmah, dharmasya mulam arthah.*" (At the root of happiness is *dharm*a, and at the root of *dharm*a is wealth.)

It is an uncomfortable truth for some, but a truth nonetheless. Economic strength sustains culture. It amplifies it. It gives it reach, voice, and continuity.

You can see this play out across India today. As Mumbai, Delhi,

Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai have grown economically, their cultural influence has expanded as well. Their stories are told more widely. Their voices travel further.

Meanwhile, Bengal — despite its extraordinary cultural and intellectual legacy — does not command the same national attention it once did.

And that is not because Bengali culture has diminished. Far from it. The depth of its literature, the beauty of its music, the intellectual rigour of its traditions — these remain unparalleled.

But culture, like a lamp, also needs oil.

As someone who walks the Shaivite and Shakta paths, Bengal holds a sacred place in my heart. This is a land where the Divine Feminine is not an abstract idea, but a lived reality; through Durga, through Kali, through Saraswati.

And yet, if I may say this with humility and affection, perhaps the time has come to restore balance.

For in our own traditions, we do not worship knowledge and power alone. We also revere prosperity.

Lakshmi is not separate from Saraswati or Durga. She completes them.

It is here that I speak, gently, to the *bhadralok* — the custodians of Bengal's intellectual and cultural heritage. There is so much that is admirable in this tradition: its refinement, its depth, its commitment to ideas.

But somewhere along the way, there has also been, at times, a discomfort with wealth creation. A scepticism of enterprise. Occasionally, even an unkindness toward those who pursue it.

And yes, perhaps even an excessive reverence for a certain long-dead German thinker — Karl Marx — whose ideas, while intellectually stimulating, have often struggled wherever they have been implemented. If an economic ideology has repeatedly fallen short for over a century, perhaps it is fair to say: *Danke, mein Herr, aber nicht mehr.*

This is not about blame. Nor is it about diminishing the past. It is about possibility.

Because Bengal still has everything it needs to rise again, not just as a cultural beacon, but as an economic force. Its people, its intellect, its creativity — these are immense strengths. Remember, the peerless Tagore family — Dwarkanath, and even Gurudev Rabindranath — were great entrepreneurs who also never stopped ideating.

There must be a renewed embrace of *artha*. Of wealth creation, of entrepreneurship, of growth.

Not as an end in itself, but as a foundation.

So that culture may flourish more widely.

So that ideas may travel farther.

So that the voice of Bengal may once again resonate across India — and beyond.

This is not a critique. It is a love letter.

From someone who arrived as a *baharigato*, but left with a part of his heart forever belonging to this city.

And like all love letters, it carries a quiet hope... that the one it is written to will listen. Not out of obligation, but out of shared affection.

For the sake of a culture that has given so much to India.

For the sake of a civilisation that must always strive for balance.

For the sake of the Mother Goddess Herself.

When we bow before Her, it cannot be to Saraswati alone. Nor only to Durga or Kali.

We must also bow to Lakshmi. *Joy Maa. Joy Maa Lakshmi.*

Amish is a bestselling author, award-winning broadcaster, and a former diplomat