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Issue Brief

Yoga Kshema: Its Roots and Relevance in the Contemporary Strategic Landscape

Vivek Chadha

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Summary

Yoga Kshema is a people-centric ancient concept that remained at the forefront of governance and national security initiatives of a state. This Brief explores its roots and continuing relevance in contemporary times.

The growing popularity and appreciation of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* has led to a renewed emphasis on *yoga kshema*, an ancient civilisational concept that has both preceded and succeeded the *Arthashastra*. It is comprehensive in its scope and manifestation. The idea is not limited by the period of its inception and prevalence. It remains timeless in its appeal. This Brief traces the ancient reference to *yoga kshema* and its relevance in contemporary times.

Various explanations have been provided by scholars as to the meaning of the term *yoga kshema*. The variation, however, is often minor and relates to its context, as will be seen in the historical examples. As a prelude to this discussion, Bibek Debroy’s explanation is a good start: “The word *yoga* has many meanings, but fundamentally, it is about acquiring what one doesn’t possess. The word *kshema* is about preserving what one does possess.”¹ L.N. Rangarajan defines *yoga kshema* as a “compound, made up of *yoga*, the successful accomplishment of an objective and *kshema*, its peaceful enjoyment”.²

Evaluating the Concept

Yoga kshema in its literal form implies acquiring what one does not possess and preserving what one possesses. However, when this is correlated to the varying circumstances in which the term has been used and the conditions under which it is applicable, subtle differentiations come to the fore.

The achievement of *yoga* and *kshema* can be viewed from an individual’s and a state’s perspective. Prevailing and shifting conditions further impact these views. At the spiritual level, the *Bhagavad Gita* suggests a path towards fulfilment through *yoga kshema*.

Acquiring possessions or wealth by an individual is closely tied to the enabling conditions that ensure economic growth. The increase in wealth of individuals leads to growth in taxes, thereby increasing the wealth of a state.

A conducive environment of economic prosperity is not created in isolation but under conditions of external and internal stability, characterised by a state’s ability to limit, neutralise or defeat threats. This helps protect individual and state assets.

Viewed collectively, this implies that prosperity and protection are two interconnected attributes that, when pursued simultaneously, help a ruler achieve the ends of *raja dharma* and the people to achieve *yoga kshema*.

¹ Bibek Debroy, “[Yoga and Kshema](#)”, *Open*, 4 February 2022.

² L.N. Rangarajan, *Kautilya: The Arthashastra*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 89–90.

A state takes measures to ensure security through several instruments and strategies. The referenced ancient texts suggest this includes a combination of means and ways to achieve the ends of *yoga kshema*. The means were referred to as the seven elements of the state. This includes the king, army, advisors, allies, treasury, forts and geographical spread.³ The *Arthashastra* refers to this as *saptanga*.

The *Mahabharata* refers to the ways to achieve state objective as:

being seated after concluding a treaty (peace), ensuring a treaty after marching out (preparing for war to strike fear in the enemy), being seated after declaring war (preparing for war with readiness for peace), seizing after marching out (war), creating a division in the enemy (dissension amongst enemy) and seeking asylum with the enemy (seeking shelter).⁴

The *Arthashastra* refers to these as *sadgunya*. The *Mahabharata* also refers to the six methods for maintaining peace. This includes, “discipline, duties of government servants, ensuring law and order, the conduct of courtiers, the removal of obstructions and dealing with other kingdoms”.⁵ The epics and the *Arthashastra* also refer to the four *upayas*—*sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda*. However, the *Nitisara* adds *maya* and *indrajaa* to these.

Viewed together, the ends are reflected through *yoga kshema*, the means in *saptanga* and the ways through *sadgunya* and the *upayas* available to the state. While the brief does not analyse the details of these elements, it reconstructs the linkages between the ends, ways and means to illustrate a sophisticated understanding of pursuing statecraft for the welfare of the people and well-being of the state.

References to Yoga Kshema in Ancient Texts

The first reference to *yoga kshema* can be traced to the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* is the oldest among the four *Vedas* and arguably the most significant. Para 10.89.10 (*mandala*, *suktas* and *mantras*) says,

Indra rules over heaven, Indra rules over earth, over the waters, and over the clouds; Indra rules over the great and over the wise; Indra is to be invoked for the acquisition and preservation (of wealth).⁶

The invoking of Indra, a god, to seek preservation of wealth and protection is followed by seeking his blessings on the king to fulfil his responsibility.

³ Bibek Debroy, “Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1385(57)”, *The Mahabharata, Vol. 8 (Translation)*, Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, 2013, p. 290.

⁴ Ibid., Ch. 1397(69), pp. 338–339.

⁵ Ibid., Ch. 1369(41), p. 248.

⁶ H.H. Wilson, [*Rig Veda \(translation and commentary\)*](#), Wisdom Library.

The *Ramayana* reinforces this early reference to *yoga kshema*. The term is repeated at several places in the *Ramayana* to suggest well-being and protection.

After Rama is exiled, the people of Ayodhya continue to look up to him for their welfare. Despite his physical absence, they say, “In the forest, Raghava will ensure *yoga* and *kshema* for us.”⁷ In essence, they look up to Rama to sustain their aspirations and protect and preserve their possessions.

Bharata, Rama’s younger brother, upon returning to Ayodhya, is distraught to find his brother exiled. He vows to get him back from the forest. He attempts to persuade him to return as the rightful king. Rama, instead, gives precedence to the promise he made to his father and remains determined to spend 14 years in the forest. A crestfallen Bharata refuses to sit on the throne and instead seeks Rama’s sandals, which will occupy the throne, and he functions as a caretaker until his brother’s return. He says:

एते प्रयच्छ संहृष्टः पादुके हेमभूषिते ।
अयोध्यायां महाप्राज्ञ योगक्षेमकरे तव ॥

O extraordinarily sagacious one!

Give us with a glad heart your sandals that are decorated in gold,

Which shall look after the Yōga and Kshēma of Ayōdhyā!⁸

In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma dwells at length on a king’s role and responsibilities. His guidance to Yudhishtira underlines the importance of ensuring the *yoga* and *kshema* of the people. Bhishma says, “O king! When a person born in a noble lineage knows about dharma and obtains great prosperity, *yoga* and *kshema* exist and welfare can be thought of.”⁹ In other words, ensuring *yoga* and *kshema* remain a key condition for the welfare of the people.

The concept is also illustrated through the spiritual aspects of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the *Mahabharata*. Krishna, while guiding Arjuna, says:

अनन्याश्चिन्तयन्तो मां ये जनाः पर्युपासते ।
तेषां नित्याभियुक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम् ॥

⁷ Bibek Debroy, “Ayodhya Kanda, Chapter 2(42)”, *The Valmiki Ramayana*, Vol. 1, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2017, p. 239.

⁸ “[Para 2.113.12, Ayodhya Kanda](#)”, [readramayana.org](#).

⁹ Bibek Debroy, “Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1385(57)”, no. 3; “Ch. 1404(76)”, p. 354.

There are those who always think of Me and engage in exclusive devotion to Me. To them, whose minds are always absorbed in Me, I provide what they lack and preserve what they already possess.¹⁰

Kautilya discusses the role of a king in promoting the welfare of his subjects. He is characterised as a *rajarishi* or a sage monarch.

A *rajarishi* is ever active in promoting the *yogakshema* of the people and who endears himself to his people by enriching them and doing good to them. The word, *yoga kshema*, is a compound made up of *yoga*, the successful accomplishment of an objective and *kshema*, its peaceful enjoyment.¹¹

The route to ensuring *yoga kshema* lies in maintaining order, which in turn allows a king to preserve his possessions and acquire new ones.¹²

Kamandaka's *Nitisara* not only reinforces the importance of both elements of *yoga kshema* but also prioritises them. “Protection is more important than economic prosperity since when protection is lacking, prosperity is as good as non-existent even when it exists.”¹³

Is the Concept of Yoga Kshema Still Relevant?

The relationship between defence and development, protection and prosperity or the guns versus butter debate has long remained a subject of discussion, often as two opposing determinants that must operate at the cost of the other. In contrast, *yoga* and *kshema* were considered complementary and connected objectives. This complementarity emerged from their inherent association with the welfare of the people, helping them realise their aspirations and securing their well-being. This made *yoga kshema* the highest goal for a king. However, recent times suggest that creating the right balance between the two has remained a challenge.

Two key realities characterise this challenge. First, nations have focused disproportionately on developing their economies while neglecting to build their capability to protect the people. Second, conversely, countries tend to overprotect, creating an unviable strain on the state's economy, thereby adversely affecting the well-being of the people. Two recent examples illustrate these conditions. Europe is a case of underspending on security while India's approach to Op Sindoor indicates

¹⁰ “[Chapter 9, Verse 22](#)”, *Bhagavad Gita – The Song of God*.

¹¹ L.N. Rangarajan, *Kautilya: The Arthashastra*, no. 2, pp. 89–90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³ Jess Ross Knutson (ed.), *Kamandaki: The Essence of Politics*, Murty Classical Library of India, New Delhi, 2021, p. 5.

the desire to strike a balance between the economy and simultaneously reinforcing deterrence against Pakistan's employment of terrorism as state policy.

Case of Europe

The first condition is perhaps best captured by Europe's reluctance to invest in its security, following decades of peace since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Secure in the idea of the receding threat during the Cold War, Europe's economy prospered under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) security umbrella. Europe's focus shifted to its economic needs. This was accompanied by a sharp decline in their defence budgets and contribution towards NATO spending. In other words, while Europe enjoyed prosperity, it shied away from spending on its protection.

The pitfalls of Europe reducing military capabilities (also related to defence expenditure) and the challenges this might pose against emerging threats (read Russia) were highlighted in a 2012 RAND monograph. Some of its alarming observations should, therefore, not come as a surprise. Europe was caught unprepared not only in 2014, but also in 2022 when Russia decided to attack Ukraine.

The report noted that the “European ground forces will be battalion and brigade teams and not full-strength divisions and corps.” It added that given the experience of deployment in Afghanistan,

NATO Europe will have neither the will nor the capability to maintain a multi-brigade expeditionary force over a long distance from Europe for a multiyear peace-enforcement mission.¹⁴

The authors observed that the budget cuts “have been driven almost entirely by the need to reduce large budget deficits—not by a change in the nature of external threats”. And that if this trend continued, “U.S. and European forces might no longer be able to operate together to meet evolving security challenges confronting the Alliance.”¹⁵

These critical observations might suggest that Europe did not have the requisite resources to meet future security needs. On the contrary, even as the defence spending of European NATO members declined by 20 per cent after the Cold War, over the same period, their GDP went up by 55 per cent!¹⁶ The challenge was not

¹⁴ F. Stephen Larrabee, Stuart E. Johnson, John Gordon IV, Peter A. Wilson, Caroline Baxter, Deborah Lai and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, *NATO and the Challenges of Austerity*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2012, p. xvi.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. xi.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 1–2

resources; it was a misguided approach towards securing what Europe has aspired to and achieved.

By the time Europe woke up to renewed security challenges with Russia occupying Crimea in 2014, most countries were inadequately invested in their defence. Europe had failed to balance the needs of *yoga kshema*, not because they did not care for the people’s welfare. Instead, they chose to turn a blind eye to potential future challenges that were already visible on the horizon.

This might suggest that Europe might have reoriented its focus after 2014. However, this did not happen. Germany, the largest economy in Europe and a lynchpin of NATO in Europe, spent 2 per cent of its GDP on defence “for the first time in three decades in 2024”.¹⁷

India’s Approach to Balance *Yoga* and *Kshema*

India has long imbibed the essence of *yoga kshema*. One of the early examples of the adoption of the concept of *yoga kshema* was in 1956, when the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) drew inspiration from the *Bhagavad Gita* and selected “योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम्” (*Yogakshemam Vahamyaham*) as its motto. The company translates this as “your welfare is our responsibility”.¹⁸ In this instance, the connotation of *yoga kshema* relates to the wider aspect of welfare, even though its relation to financial security is inherent to the role of life insurance.

In 2022, during her budget speech, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also referred to *yoga kshema*. She said,

The king must make arrangements for *yogakshema* (welfare) of the populace by abandoning any laxity and by governing the state in line with *dharma*, along with collecting taxes which are in consonance with the *dharma*.¹⁹

The illustrations reinforce and establish the historical reference to the concept. How can this be interpreted through its continuing relevance to strategic affairs?

As previously discussed, *yoga kshema* implies prosperity and protection, particularly in light of the current geopolitical environment. Prosperity and protection are two distinct conditions that are not achieved in isolation. On the contrary, they are closely interlinked and related, as discussed earlier. Taking this discussion further

¹⁷ Maria Martinez, “[How Germany Will Pay for Rapid Rise in Defence Spending?](#)”, *Reuters*, 24 June 2025.

¹⁸ “[LIC: Understanding Life Insurance Corporation of India](#)”, *Vedantu*.

¹⁹ Bibek Debroy, “[Yoga and Kshema](#)”, no.1.

and for easier understanding, prosperity and protection can be visualised as operating on sliding scales. Their positions on the scales need calibration and adjustment to maximise their resultant impact for a country. It will be useful to illustrate this through an example.

The recent debate around the terrorist attack by Pakistan at Pahalgam on 22 April 2025 is an instructive example of India not going overboard to seek protection and retaining a balanced approach. The heinous and barbaric nature of the attack demanded a suitable response from the state. It would reinforce people’s confidence in the government’s ability to provide security to its citizens.

Yet, it was important to calibrate force application. As evident by the fourth day of the strike-counterstrike actions on 10 May 2025, India had the ability to strike Pakistan harder and longer if the need arose. However, the leaders chose to de-escalate the situation after Pakistan proposed a cessation of military actions. How does this example highlight the importance of *yoga kshema*?

India remains focussed on improving its economy. This includes achieving the status of a developed country by 2047. This requires sustained high rates of growth, which in turn demands a stable environment for economic development. Conflicts and wars can potentially derail this growth trajectory. Simultaneously, conditions of instability caused by terrorism, insurgencies and civil unrest will create situations that discourage investment, limit the growth of industrial output and adversely affect the economy’s competitiveness. External conflicts can be even more destabilising to sustained economic growth. Wars, therefore, remain the instrument of last resort.

The need for economic growth and a secure environment reflects a balance between the two requirements. The focus of attention cannot remain solely on the economy at the cost of maintaining a robust security infrastructure. Similarly, a disproportionate focus on defence expenditure can derail the economic objectives.

When this desirable balance is related to incidents like the Pahalgam terrorist attack by Pakistan, India’s actions can be better understood in the context of *yoga kshema*. After Pakistan’s terrorist attack, India responded by targeting terrorist infrastructure and camps inside Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Pakistan. India’s action was characterised by justifiable use of force. It was precise in the choice of targets, made a distinction between terrorists and innocent local people and was limited in its intent.

In other words, it was punishment for the guilty alone, without the intention of escalating the situation. When Pakistan chose to heighten force employment, at each stage of the escalation ladder, India undertook a measured response and simultaneously indicated its readiness to de-escalate. Ultimately, when Pakistan proposed a ceasefire on 10 May 2025, India accepted it.

The series of actions indicates India’s determination to punish terrorism, reinforce its deterrence posture, while emphasising that deterrence is not a zero-sum game. Despite the decision to employ force, India did not want the actions to derail its long-term objective of maintaining a stable environment.

It is unlikely that Pakistan will give up its employment of terrorism as a state policy. The “establishment” is as yet unconvinced of the self-defeating and self-destructive impact of employing terrorism, despite its domestic fallout.

Protection and economic growth are not constants. Instead, every country chooses their respective positioning on parallel sliding scales. Every reassessment of security considerations and economic growth will demand a similar recalibration. India not only undertakes an introspective approach to balance these two factors, but the country also looks outwards across the borders.

India’s approach has been to raise the costs of Pakistan through considered shifts on the protection and economic growth sliders. This is not an entirely bilateral equation. Actions by both countries are also influenced by the support and pressure exerted by major world powers. Pakistan is more likely to resort to adventurism with an unabated flow of modern weapons from China and the US hesitating to block funds that end up for the procurement of weapons.

Since the prosperity and protection sliders representing economic development and the country’s defence are not constant, prevailing circumstances and contributing conditions will guide the actions of the leadership. The decision will be a judgement call based on how the state perceives its threats and interests.

These examples suggest that despite states remaining focussed on the welfare and well-being of their citizens, misjudgement on the sliding scales of prosperity and protection or the economy and defence can lead to failure to ensure *yoga kshema*. Over time, the aspirational goal should remain raising the focus on prosperity and lowering it on the protection slider.

However, that is the characteristic of *Krita Yuga* or a utopian world. Until then, the real world will continue to demand a delicate balance to achieve *yoga kshema*, where an economically vibrant society aids in strengthening the protective capabilities of the country.

About the Author



Col. Vivek Chadha (Retd.) is Senior Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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