

Rajdharmā's Transaction from Mahābhārata and Arthashastra to Contemporary Indian Politics and Society

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Abstract:

India has diverse socio-cultural-political frameworks. This study examines how concepts from the Mahābhārata and the Arthashastra—two ancient texts integral to Indian thought have shaped and continue to shape good governance, the rule of law, and state welfare in India. The Mahābhārata's Shanti Parva defines rajdharmā, providing ethical guidance for rulers, while the Arthashastra offers pragmatic strategies for statecraft. These works create a foundational model for leadership that prioritises the security and well-being of citizens. As Indian society evolves, the analysis examines how rajdharmā evolves within constitutional democracy, exploring both the philosophical and empirical legacies of these treatises for modern Indian governance. Using qualitative and descriptive analytical methods, the main objective is to clarify the philosophical and normative approaches in the Mahābhārata and the Arthashastra and to assess their continuing impact on political and social life. Constitutional democracy evaluates the adaptation of rajdharmā.

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Introduction:

The foundations of modern Indian politics and society are deeply rooted in ancient traditions. The main components of contemporary India's Preamble are Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic, and Republic, and it aims to secure Justice, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity for all citizens. In ancient times, rajdharmā defined the ruler's duty towards the people (Prajā), inspiring the Indian government to prioritise their well-being. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Arthashastra* reflect traditional civilisation, emphasising adherence to state rules and regulations. These texts are more than mythological narratives; the *Mahābhārata* is a collection of Sanskrit treatises on power conflict, while the *Arthashastra* is an ancient treatise on statecraft, economic policies, and military strategy. From these texts, many leaders, such as Gandhiji, B. R. Ambedkar, and other thinkers, are inspired by the concept of rajdharmā and refer to it to transmit ethical and social knowledge from one generation to another. In the 21st century, rajdharmā's ethical principles, philosophical aspects, and basic rules on state politics and the well-being of society inspire Indian civil society and sovereignty, which underpin the rule of law.

The *Mahābhārata* portrays dharma as righteousness, justice, and cosmic order, especially in the Shanti Parva. On the other hand, in the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya (the greatest economist and master strategist of the

Maurya Empire, known as Chanakya) presents a pragmatic and systemic view of governance, in which the king is bound to follow rajdharma. If any praja breaks the rules, they have to get danda (punishment). These two texts represent ethical, strategic, and pragmatic philosophical perspectives that influence modern Indian politics and society. The *Arthashastra* advocates a systematic, centralised authority, bureaucratic administration, and strategic diplomacy, paralleling modern international relations. Conversely, the *Mahabharata* emphasises accountability, justice, and social order. To understand the key aspects of Indian culture and tradition, it is important to explore its ancient history. The conceptual frameworks of these classical texts shape political discourse, institutional practices, and societal expectations.

Research Questions:

- What impacts have the Mahabharata and the Arthashastra rajdharma had on modern Indian politics and society?
- What are the similarities between traditional rajdharma and contemporary Indian politics?
- How have the Mahabharata and the Arthashastra rajdharma influenced the key social aspects of contemporary India?

Research Objectives:

- To examine the impact of the Mahabharata and Arthashastra rajdharma on modern Indian politics and society.
- To analyse the major similarities between ancient-period dharma and modern-period politics.
- To understand the key components of contemporary Indian social perspectives based on the Mahabharata and the Arthashastra rajdharma.

Research Methodology:

In this study, a qualitative and interpretative research methodology has used. To examine the basic concept of rajdharma from The *Mahabharata* and The *Arthashastra*. As primary sources, classical textual analyses of the ethical, moral, and philosophical sections of Rajdharmas are examined in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata and in Kautilya's Arthashastra. To further explore a comparative and conceptual analysis, this paper describes the evolution of classical rajdharma's impact on contemporary Indian politics and social thought. Secondary sources are scholarly works on Indian political philosophy and governance. Through, these sources, the study helps to trace the relevance of rajdharma into the contemporary period leadership, justice and public welfare in India.

Frameworks of Rajdharma in the Mahabharata:

Ved Vayas epic saga, the *Mahabharata*, is an epic sanskrit mythological poem that provides society with knowledge of the struggle for power between the Pandavas and the Kauravas for sovereignty. In the Kurukshetra, Sri Krishna guided Arjuna by divine knowledge to overcome his dilemmas. After the Kurukshetra war, with the Pandavas' victory, the Shanti Parva (12th Parva, comprising 18 Parvas) began, as conveyed by Bhishma Pitamah to the new king of Hastinapur, Yudhishtira, with the restoration of rajdharma (the king's duty). Rajdharma is an ethically based, duty-based system of governance, in which the king's duty is grounded not in divine rights but in adherence to his ethical principles, social justice, and the welfare of the people (Prajā hita).

By the beginning of the Shanti Parva, two new concepts were introduced: the divine origin theory and the social contract theory. As a concept of the divine origin theory, the state and the ruler were considered

divine, with the ruler serving as a representative of divine perspectives for the enforcement of dharma and the maintenance of justice. In contrast, the social contract theory represents a pragmatic view of the state's origin. According to this theory, the state was formed by an agreement among the people. Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651) maintained in his famous social contract theory that people lived in a where they were solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. The state of war ended by the people agreement to give their liberty into the hands of sovereign, on the condition that their lives were safeguarded by sovereign power. Correspondingly, before Shanti Parva, there was no state, People lived during the golden age of harmony and happiness. But with the development of agriculture, the concept of personal property was created. To protect their welfare, wealth kings dharma arose. In the 67th chapter of Shanti Parva, the concept of matsyanyaya came into the frame, where, with the lack of order, the big fish ate the small ones. People with these perspectives agreed to secure their lives and property and to protect their welfare, with the ruler present. By the rule of laws king kept peace and stability in the state. Shanti Parva has 365 chapters and 13,716 shlokas. Shanti Parva's rajdharma is a path of significant philosophical and ethical discourse on statecraft and governance.

King's role to Protect People (Prajā-hita) is essential righteousness:

In Pitamaha Bhishma's guidance to the new ruler of Hastinapur, he defines rajdharma as the primary duty (palana) to uphold justice, protect the weak, and value wise counsel. The king serves the people and must act in accordance with dharma. His primary duty is to ensure peace and prosperity as a concept of Praja-hita (Well-being of people). The King needs ministers for guidance. Government exists to ensure the security of people and to ensure justice. Good governance requires monitoring administration. With this, people can sleep fearlessly. Citizens had to obey the king's laws. It particularly provides ethical leadership of a ruler and the moral responsibilities of power.

Mahabharata is like Kautilya's Saptanga theory, which holds that the state comprises seven elements: Raja, Mantri, Kosa (Treasury), Danda (Military), Mitra (Friend), Rastra, and Nagar. In the Shantiparva, dharmas are divided into three subparvas:

- (i) **Rajadharmanushasana Parva:** This part describes the duties of the king and his governance.
- (ii) **Apaddharmaanushasana Parva:** This part describes the rules of conduct when one faces an emergency.
- (iii) **Mokshadharma Parva:** This Parva describes the behaviour and rules to achieve moksha or salvation.

Mahabharata's Shanti Parva is the soul of Indian culture. Shanti, meaning peace, is not merely a passive way but an active social and moral order. The basic rules of the Shanti Parva influenced Indian political thought, especially during the independence movement, through Mahatma Gandhi's Ahimsa movement. From contemporary Indian perspectives, Shanti Parva's rajdharma continues to guide governance policies, laws, and social activities.

Key Themes of Rajadharma in the Shanti Parva:

- i) **Duties of a King:** After the Kurukshetra war, Yudhistara and the rest of the Pandavas, with Shri Krishna, went to Bhishma, where he was lying in the bed of arrows. He guided Hastinapur's new king to uphold justice and dharma (righteousness). The welfare of the state should be the king's highest priority. The king must ensure that the state is protected from internal and external threats while promoting the prosperity and well-being of its people.

- ii) **Justice and Law:** Shanti Parva's rajadharma demands that the king deliver impartial justice and ensure the strict enforcement of laws. Bhishma asserts that law and order are the bedrock of a stable state; any deviation from justice invites chaos.
- iii) **Moral Governance:** The king must govern ethically. Bhishma stresses virtues like truth, compassion, patience, and generosity. The ruler should avoid greed and focus on the greater good.
- iv) **Protection of the Kingdom:** Rajadharma means to have a strong defence system. Pitamah Bhishma commands that the king must have a strong army to protect from all threats. In a war-like situation, the state should first choose a diplomatic way to protect itself, and war should be the last resort.
- v) **Economic Responsibilities:** Bhishma says rulers must ensure that agriculture, trade, and industry thrive. Taxes must be fair, and resources must be distributed equitably.
- vi) **Advisors and Ministers:** A king must have wise and competent advisors. Bhishma advises Yudhishtira to consult knowledgeable ministers across various fields and to consider their counsel seriously before making decisions.
- vii) **Welfare of the People:** The welfare of the people is the paramount objective of rajadharma. Bhishma asserts that the king is not above his subjects but serves them. The king must ensure their happiness and well-being, remain fully accessible, and address grievances promptly.
- viii) **Spirituality and Dharma:** It's important to maintain spirituality in governance. A ruler should be spiritually inclined and act in accordance with dharma. Rajadharma was not just about administrative efficiency but also about leading a righteous life and setting an example for others to follow.

The *Mahabharata's* rajdharma is a profound and timeless understanding of governance, justice and social harmony. It provides equal justice, institutional justice and spatial justice among the people. In the Shanti Parva, women's role in society is deeply rooted in the concept of dharma, the cosmic order of society. As a part of the *Mahabharata*, Drupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari are role models of spiritual strength, courage and resilience. Although they are not directly involved in politics, their role is effective within the legal system and in advancing gender equality.

Rajdharma in Arthashastra: an ethical role of a king:

Kautilya (also known as Chanakya) was the greatest Indian political philosopher of the 4th century B.C., and, with the help of his Mauryan dynasty, he eradicated the Nanda dynasty. He served as an educator of Chandragupta Maurya and later became the Prime Minister of his dynasty. One of Chanakya's greatest texts was the *Arthashastra*. It comprises 15 books with 150 chapters. This book is recognised as one of the most important ancient texts, which guides contemporary Indian government policies, rules, and, most relevantly, good governance. It offers many perspectives on how a ruler should govern a state. It is his pragmatic and strategic view for the protection (raksana) of the Mouriya dynasty. This text has a profound level of statecraft, economics, law, military strategy, diplomacy, and foreign policy.

Kautilya defined policies for statecraft:

Kautilya diligently emphasised the importance of internal and external threats posed by traitors and other powerful states. To protect the state, his main element is the 'Mandal theory'. To understand the classic components of this theory, it is important to develop ideas about the state. Kautilya rejected the divine origin of the monarch; despite this, he considered the monarch a human institution. In his conceptualisation of the state, a threefold system is present: one is the practice of dharma, in which the state must fulfil its responsibilities as rakshak (Protector) and Palak (Nurturer).

For the protection of a state, it's important to have good relations with other states. The Mandala theory holds that both a friend and an enemy are constituent elements of Kautilya's concept of sovereignty. In the contemporary period, the Indian government follows this theory, which helps foster clear administrative concepts and good relations with neighbouring countries. Kautilya described a king as a Vijigisu, the world conqueror, placed in the centre of the circle states. Five kings are standing before Vijigisu. They are –

- (i) Ari - the enemy of Vijigisu.
- (ii) Mitraprakriti- the friend of Vijigisu,
- (iii) Arimitra- friend of Ari and enemy of Vijigisu.
- (iv) Mitramitra- friend of the friend of Vijigisu and enemy of Ari and Arimitra.
- (v) Arimitra-mitra- friend of the enemy friend.

Behind the Vijigisu exists :

- (i) Parsanigraha
- (ii) Akrandas.
- (iii) Parsanigrahasara
- (iv) Akrandanasava

Far around the 'Vijigisu' exists:— (i) Madhyama (Intermediate)

- (ii) Udasina (Neutral).

In this theory, Vijigisu has balanced power. It describes that the two states behind his neighbours are natural allies. To understand his statehood policy, his 'Seven Prakriti' or 'the Saptanga theory' was one of the chief components of the *Arthashastra*. Seven elements of sovereignty comprise the different parts (angas) of the state: the king, Amatya, Janapada, Durga, Kosa, Danda, and Mitra.

From an ethical perspective, his concept of dharma is rooted in the idea of justice, which follows moral laws and social order. Rajdharma has moral and philosophical perspectives that define the king's duty towards the welfare state. Kautilya's political conceptual idea is rooted in preventing matsyanyaya (the law of fish) and in protecting the yogakshema (security and welfare) of the people. By establishing law, Kautilya protects the righteousness and duty of a king. According to him, rajdharma is considered the supreme law of the land. He emphasises that the king's happiness lies in the people's happiness (Prajasukhe sukham rajnah). Kautilya's vision for rajdharma is pragmatic, ensuring the king's religious duty towards the state and aiming to establish a stable, wealthy, and secure society. Although his main aim is to promote state security, women play an important role as wives and householders. In this text, the state's responsibility to protect women from violence and exploitation is stated. In some areas, this text provides evidence of involvement in administrative work. For state security, they worked as spies and intelligence agents.¹⁴

Rajdharma's Impact on Modern Indian Politics and Society:

The *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra's* rajdharma ensure an equal societal justice and state welfare for their people (praja), which are the most important foundational pillars of modern Indian politics and society. Rajdharama (the duty of the king) is fundamentally linked to governance, state welfare, and, most

importantly, the protection of Indian citizens. These epic philosophical and ethical texts of Rajdharmā provide Sushasan (good governance) and Nyaya (justice), which are directly incorporated into Indian politics and society. Contemporary Indian politics and society are rooted in ancient moral and philosophical contexts, and the present government has a vision to promote a strong, united, and ethically driven nation-state policy.

Administrative features based on Rajdharmā:

In the contemporary period, India's administrative policies, such as Labour and social security policies, health and gender policies, fundamental rights (Part III), and Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV), are closely related to ancient Indian philosophy, which is primarily derived from the concept of rajdharmā. Under Article 38, the constitutional duty of the state to strive for justice and promote public welfare is a modern manifestation of the ancient ruler's duty to protect and nurture his people (prajas). In the Judicial section, the core of manifesting the preamble through justice, equality, and liberty is present in rajdharmā. The welfare of citizens is the main aim of the Indian government. Rather, the concept of people's development in the SMART (Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive, Transparent) framework is profound in ancient scriptures. India's Pro-people Good Governance (P2G2) concept is part of rajdharmā, which is closely connected to the new aspect of Viksit Bharat.

Rajdharmā influences contemporary Indian politics by being central to the local government system for upholding justice and people's rights. Kautilya's 'Mandal Theory' or state-centric theory inspired Indian foreign policy and diplomatic relations with neighbouring states. In the field of international relations, Kautilya's theory influenced Indian foreign policy. At the Panchayat level, the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra* have guided the policies of rajdharmā for well-being and security at the local level. The Panchayat Raj system, with its decentralised approach to administration, is rooted in the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra's* concept of rajdharmā. The local village system was an initial part of the king's duty (Rajdharmā) to protect the welfare, stability, and justice of the people. Similarly, after several committees were formed, the Panchayat Raj System was enacted in 1992 as a local self-government institution.

The modern legal system is based on ancient Rajdharmā:

Compared to the rajdharmā, the Indian Constitution imposes a duty to protect citizens' lives, liberty, and property. Kautilya's danda niti is the guiding spirit of the entire judicial system, as reflected in the Indian Penal Code (IPC). To protect against arbitrary acts, the Indian Constitution provides Article 14, which establishes the principle of equality before the law. Kautilya's law for women's safety influenced the Indian Penal Code, Section 354, which protects women, and Section 376, which deals with rape. It also influenced the protection of women from the Domestic Violence Act of 2005.¹⁹ Both texts ensure people's security and well-being, which aligns with the modern political and societal concepts of public welfare, social justice, and prosperity.

Conclusion:

The Rajdharmā in the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra* are not merely mythological textbooks but guidance for Indian constitution-makers. In the 21st century, the Indian constitution has the basic components of a democratic sovereign nation, despite the modern concept of the nation; its roots are sketched in two ancient texts and, most importantly, in the key aspects of rajdharmā. The integration of rajdharmā (duty of the king) from the *Mahabharata* holds that the king's moral and ethical dharmā is to protect and promote the well-being of the people (Prajā-hita). Similarly, in the *Arthashastra's* rajdharmā context, it provides pragmatic statecraft and various regulations for kings, designed by Kautilya to secure the state's well-being. To secure justice in society, danda (punishment) would be administered, as in the modern

era, and the Judiciary would follow the Indian Penal Code. From ancient times rajdharma has played a significant role and continues to impact the contemporary period. Our democratic system has emerged inspired by these sagas. The fundamental rights and duties in the contemporary period uphold justice for the citizens. Although monarchy existed in ancient times, democracy is the form of government in contemporary India. However, The *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra's* rajdharma have significant role in modern politics, but there is a significant transformation of governance. In ancient political systems, rajdharma was a moral duty of a king or a ruler of a state. In modern India, these duties have decentralised among the constitutional authorities, public institutions and democratic representatives. In both texts, the main aim is to uphold justice for people, well-defined good governance, and a strong military to protect the state. It shapes the philosophical and normative foundations of modern Indian politics and society.

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