

Rajdharma, Welfare State and the Political Right to Rule: A Re-Examination of Democratic Governance in India

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Abstract: The current debate on the nature of democratic governance in India is often limited within the confines of Western liberal constitutionalism, creating an impression that it has no historical legacy and so answers to more profound civilizational and philosophical questions regarding public expectation from political authority. This paper examines the conceptual link between Rajdharma, the classical Indian code on righteous governance and duties of political officeholders, and contemporary welfare demands in a democracy. This study examines how classical Sanskrit texts can be placed in contrast to the structural commitments of the Indian Constitution and argues that Rajdharma offers an abiding ethical discourse by which political obligation is minimised to not only civility towards the state but a mutual voluntary moral contract where legitimacy of power resides within the socio-economic welfare and protection of citizens rather than just their civic observance. Through a historiographical synthesis — combining an analysis of not only historical texts but also constitutional provisions (in particular, the Directive Principles of State Policy) and contemporary governance model (s), this paper asks how the ancient ethos of Rajdharma can breathe renewed life into democratic institutions today, restore substantive justice with its underlying social conscience to politics which have become all too technocratic, and finally proffer a solution to India's enduring reality: chronic political accountability crisis.

Introduction: The architecture of the modern Indian state is formally grounded on the 1950 Constitution, a framework testifying to an admixture of global constitutional wisdom and specific socio-historical necessities of a post-colonial polity. Although the structures of Indian democracy — parliament, an independent judiciary, federalism and universal adult franchise — are closely modelled on Western liberal and socialist understandings of democratic statecraft, political experience in India continues to be mediated through indigenous lexicons of politics. Of all these, the idea of Rajdharma occupies a central but opaque position. Traditionally understood to mean the "responsibilities of the king" — i.e. moral ideals of governance— Rajdharma has resurfaced in today's public conversation as an important

benchmark for assessing political morality, state capacity and ruling class commitments regarding welfare.

In the context of a democracy, rethinking Rajdharma requires firstly, an epistemological shift. It contests the view that ancient Indian political thought is monarchical, spiritualist, or rigidly hierarchical in a reductionist way. Instead, contextualizing Rajdharma in the wider tradition of Indian political thought (e.g. Ansuya Nain, Sanjeev Kumar Sharma 2021) shows a well-developed native law dealing with state obligation, mitigating despotism and even material welfare of the people. The current paper examines the relation between traditional prescriptions of Rajdharma and modern welfare state and political responsibility principles. Exploring the continuum from Kautilyan pragmatism and Epic ethics to constitutional morality, this essay argues that Rajdharma corrects what is limited in procedural democracy by shifting the perspective of governance from a bare politics of power management into political, moral custodianship.

Theoretical Foundations: Dissecting Rajdharma In Classical Texts - To apply Rajdharma in a modern context, one must first deconstruct the textual and philosophical genealogy of this principle. Rajdharma, then, is not a single doctrine; it is an ongoing synthesis of moral imperatives from throughout the Mahabharata (mostly Shanti Parva), the Ramayana, the Manusmriti and foundational texts such as Kautilya's Arthashastra. As Kusuma Krishna Subha has noted, not only does this notion of the relative autonomy of rulers picking ethical values require some look to a higher normative order, but ancient Indian political texts have consistently subordinated personal sovereignty to dharma. Here, Dharma goes beyond literal religion; it means the underlying cosmic and social order necessary for human life and flourishing.

In the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, Bhishma tells Rajdharma to Yudhishthira, by means of which he states Raksha (protect) and Palan (nurture) define the duties for a ruler. The king or the sovereign authority is not an all-powerful autocratic figure — a master whose word is law; rather, the king and/or sovereign power is represented as an operational custodian who exists to obey strict moral obligations. Importantly, classical Works maintain a contractual or quasi-contractual conception of the origin of the state. According to accounts of the Matsya Nyaya (the state of nature defined by the "logic of the fish," wherein the strong eat the weak), human beings seek suitable governance to abandon anarchy. Subjects pay taxes and pledge allegiance in exchange for security and social order offered by the sovereign.

This dynamic sets up a reciprocal framework of political obligation that is inherently foundational. Indeed, as describes the indigenous tradition of Rajdharma which Sharma (2018) observes as the precursor to welfare state theory, poverty alleviation and social security were not acts of state benevolence or charity (daya) in ancient India but a matter of strict legal and moral duty (dharma). For example, one such pragmatic welfare disposition is found in Kautilya's Arthashastra, which provides that "The king shall provide for orphans & the aged, the infirm afflicted persons and helpless women [and] Maintain children of those who die in service of state" (2.30). In this sense, the traditional understanding of Rajdharma is in fact well aligned to contemporary welfarism, which maintains that political legitimacy is strictly correlated with success in protecting utilitarian individual lives (savetha) and advancing harmony in the social dimension (Lokasamgraha).

Moving from Rajdharma to Constitutional Morality - An engagement with the concept of Rajdharma in a democratic context must be in conversation with monarchical tradition and modern republican constitutionalism. A.K. Pandey (2020) traces a powerful arc of this shift, claiming that the moral core of Rajdharma has now been successfully internalised in an idea of "constitutional morality" that now characterises modern India. Constitutional morality, a phrase ascribed to Dr B.R. Ambedkar himself, mandates two things — a strict adherence to the text of the constitution and an absolute devotion to social justice, equality and fraternity.

The confused relation of Rajdharma with its anointed king in time, transformed in the contemporary idiom to be translated into (forgive for this comparison) the current ruling class, which is not a crowned monarch but rather an elected representative hand-in-hand with the bureaucratic machinery/executive apparatus/democratic republic. The immortal saying, "the subjects are the king and so their happiness is the happiness of the king", finds a direct structural expression in Part IV of the Indian Constitution: the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP). Sujatha Balasubramanian illustrates and locates the Indic roots of, at least certain aspects of Articles 36-51 in her analysis, tracing the socio-economic vision enshrined in the DPSP — from equitably distributive material resources (Article 39) to fair and humane conditions of work and maternity provision (Article 42); all in consistent view with classical Rajdharma.

Moreover, Rajdharma explains a unique deficiency of procedural democracy as it confronts modern democratic governance. Though in contemporary political science it is often the only consideration presented, electoral legitimacy (the winning of just over 50% of the votes) is

typically presumed to be necessary and sufficient for whatever claims a government might have to political obligation. The laws enacted by the state are regarded as being obeyed because they stem from a normatively legitimate procedure. But Rajdharmā has a great substance control of state power. It argues that legal validity divorced from moral rightness and welfare results destroys the foundation of the ruler's legitimacy. A political obligation crisis stemming from rajdharmā violation can arise when a government cannot protect them, allows systemic inequality or purposely inflicts structural violence on the marginalised. Viewed this way, civil disobedience, social movements and public dissent in India should not be seen as usurpation of state power but moral appeals to restore Rajdharmā.

An Overview - In the recent geopolitical context, the Indian state has to be aware of economic divide, agrarian distress, urban poverty and social stratification as it is in the process of developing. Mainstream policy paradigms often veer between neo-liberal growth economics and populist welfare payouts in dealing with these structural crises. But to tackle these in the framework of Rajdharmā and ethical governance is a complete up versus narrow economism.

The Rajdharmā creates an inextricable connection between ethical governance and socio-economic justice, says Harshvardhan Singh. Orthodox thinking holds that any human society whose organisation denies access to basic requirements of life—where more than a handful approach opulence—and does so without exercise quantity or limit—those societies are internally contradictory and lose their moral viability. A ruler who either rewards this imbalance or enables it faces both political collapse and moral perdition. This principle closely reflects the Gandhian idea of Ramrajya, explored in detail by Badri Narayan Mishra as a source of inspiration for a modern Indian welfare state. In Gandhi's view, Ramrajya is not a sectarian pantheon, but an ideal polity arising from people's sovereignty based on moral authority, Antyodaya and the abolition of socio-economic exploitation.

For application in the evaluation of contemporary administrative practices, the Rajdharmā framework provides nuanced assessment matrices. One of the recent scholarly corrective attempts is the Rajadharmā Pariksha framework proposed by Arun Jayaramakrishnan (2023), which seeks to provide a means to evaluate classical skills needed for governance in modern political candidates. Evaluating leaders on the basis of normative values based on Dharma Shastra, such as integrity (satya), neutrality (samadrishti), capacity for empathetic listening and administrative skills/competences — this normative framework links the gap between

normative theory and electoral practice. It indicates that the politics of today cannot live on identity politicking or material clientelism alone; it requires a re-establishment of moral authority and visible commitment to collective welfare.

Continuity and Transformation: Continuum governance model. In order to implement these insights without delving into historical romanticism, a continuous system of data transmission must be constructed between ancient ideas and contemporary democratic processes. An analytical tool Pardeep Sahni provides in his work on continuum model of ethical and effective governance in India. If Public Administration in India is to achieve administrative efficiency and legitimacy, Sahni contends it cannot wish away its socio-cultural legacy.

This is the perspective that a continuum model takes, such as Dale (1856). The administrative ethos of a society is formed from centuries of prior tap roots of cultural conditioning. Western administrative theory focuses on Weberian rational-legal authority, rule-bound behaviour, and structural efficiency, while the Indian administrative context is dominated by relational duties, paternalistic expectations of care from the state, and a moral ontology of leadership. In a cultural environment where public office holders remain subject to standards that are almost Rajdharmā — personal austerity, responsiveness to public misery and integrity beyond question, etc.—far too technocratic governance never communicates properly with the electorate.

Engaging with what Rajdharmā means would enable a reconfiguration of existing bureaucratic and political machinery from a culture driven by self-interested professionalisation rationality to one infused with an ethic based on care and trusteeship. As such, this continuum model of political obligation is a positive feedback mechanism with respect to the citizen's duty to obey the law, which depends on the commitment that the state demonstrates in relation to fulfilling its primary role of Raksha (protection from systemic vulnerability, material deprivation and injustice). The result is that when the state abandons its responsibilities to this collective welfare and well-being, what underpinned moral political obligation crumbles away, leaving alienation, a social movement, optimism crisis of democratic faith.

An academic critique of Rajdharmā therefore needs to wrestle with its past, especially the limits and ideological hostage-taking that have plagued it. Often the classical texts on Rajdharmā would reflect the hierarchical social structures prevailing in society, such as that

of the Varna system or that of patriarchy, even. Such assessments correctly argue that uncritical invocations of ancient statecraft are not only open to misinterpretation — a volatile combination of exclusionary social orders, quasi-paternalistic authoritarianism in the mode of 'Soviet Railway', the raising of a patina over controversies around caste equity and religious polarisation from above — but also obscure India's self-declared nature as a pluralistic, secular republic.

Consequently, any today's reconstruction of Rajdharmā must be wholly democratic, equitable and rights-based. Contemporary constitutionalism brings what classical Rajdharmā needed: formal guarantees of equality, human rights and protections for minorities, enforceable in courts against state action and held to account by popular elections. Today, reinterpreting Rajdharmā does not mean returning to the archaic legal codes or templates of monarchy, but recovering the universal ethical core of the tradition — that power is a public called trust; governance is simply taking care of people; rulers are morally responsible for both the material and moral condition of society.

Through the sieve of constitutional morality, historians and practitioners today could filter Rajdharmā from its exclusionary past and give it new life as an indigenous anti-corruption, anti-apathy, and anti-neoliberal critique. This reframes political obligation as not merely a reflexive submission to state commands, but as an active relationship, grounded in morality, in which citizens insist on justice and the state meets its foundational duty of care.

Conclusion - What this whole inquiry into Rajdharmā, welfare and political obligation reveals is that the crisis of governance in contemporary India is not some institutional or economic malaise but primarily an ethical one. The structural mechanics of Indian democracy stand robustly enshrined in its Constitution, yet there is often little accountability — and in public life a mind-numbing inequality and disconnection between those who exercise power (our rulers) and the much-maligned common people. Based on this insight of reciprocal duties, and by reformulating the classical insights of Rajdharmā in light of modern scholarship on indigenous political thought, this paper has sought to argue that the Indian tradition provides an advanced conceptual framework of political obligation.

Within this framework, the legitimacy of the state is irrevocably tied to its performance as a welfare-maximising and protective unit. India can create a genuinely ethical model of democratic governance by marrying the classical perceptions of Rajdharmā with modern constitutional morality. Such a synthesis pays tribute to the civilisation of the nation and

meets the transformative promise of its Constitution, for those who hold power would be reminded that power devoid of Dharma is tyranny; rule without welfare is a violation of the agreement called politics.

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