



Dharma and Rajdharma: The Influence of Indian Epics in Modern Indian Polity

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Abstract: *The paper examines the influence of Dharma and Rajdharma, articulated in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, on modern Indian polity. Although contemporary India is founded on constitutionalism, democratic principles, and legal-rational authority, its political morality and public expectations remain deeply informed by the ethical consciousness of the epics. By defining the philosophical foundations of Dharma as a moral, social, and cosmic order, and Rajdharma as the normative duties of rulers, the paper demonstrates how these frameworks shaped ancient models of leadership and continue to guide modern political thought. Through an analysis of Rama's idealised kingship, Krishna's contextual statecraft, Vidura's administrative ethics, and Yudhishtira's moral dilemmas, the study highlights how governance in the epics integrates virtue, justice, strategic judgement, and accountability. It argues that while the institutions of the Indian state are secular, the ethical expectations surrounding governance are profoundly shaped by civilizational narratives.*

Key Words: *Dharma, Rajdharma, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Indian Epics, Indian polity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are not only ancient literary works; they are often referred to as the foundational civilizational texts that continue to influence the political sphere, ethical reasoning, and collective consciousness in modern India. A central feature of both epics is the concept of Dharma, an idea that transcends conventional definitions of religion and enters the realms of ethics, justice, and social order. Within this larger concept lies the idea of Rajdharma or Kshatriya Dharma, the moral obligations of rulers and political actors in the larger realm of human and political conduct. Even as India functions today as a constitutional republic founded on legal-rational principles, the moral vocabulary of the epics continues to shape the ideas of leadership, discussions on justice, rights and liberties, debates on state responsibility, and the ethos of public life.

Modern India's political discourse is frequently attributed to "Rama Rajya" or righteous rule, Yudhishtira's dilemmas, Krishna's ethical statecraft, and Vidura's counsel. These references are not merely symbolic but they reflect deeper social discussion about ethical governance and political virtue. Political leaders across the spectrum, from Mahatma Gandhi to Jawaharlal Nehru, and from Atal Bihari Vajpayee to more contemporary figures, have drawn inspiration from ancient texts to articulate their political visions. Moreover, the ethical language of the epics significantly influenced Dr B. R. Ambedkar to construct a moral order grounded in justice, equality, and constitutionalism (Ambedkar, 1994) [1].

2. Conceptual Foundations of Dharma and Rajdharma

Dharma as a Moral, Social, and Cosmic Order

Dharma, throughout the Sanskritic tradition, denotes a spectrum of meanings: duty, ethics, law, justice, truth, and the maintenance of order (Olivelle, 2004) [2]. The concept of Dharma is performing one's duties in terms of one's position in society. The meaning implied when Dharma is listed among the four major goals that all persons are expected to pursue in life, namely Dharma, Artha (seeking wealth), Kama (pursuing worldly pleasures) and Moksha (gaining liberation from the burden of past karma) (Paranjpe, 2013) [3].



Rajdharma and Political Ethics

Rajdharma is Dharma applied to governance or rule. It is also known as Kshatriya Dharma. It highlights the responsibilities of rulers, such as:

- Upholding justice
- Protecting the vulnerable
- Ensuring welfare
- Maintaining peace and order
- Exercising restraint in power

In both epics, Rajdharma is not limited to idealist morality; it includes statecraft, strategic decision-making, and contextual ethics that are highly relevant to contemporary political environments.

3. Dharma and Rajdharma in the Ramayana

1. Rama as an Embodiment of Rajdharma

In the Ramayana, Rama represents a ruler who subordinates personal desires to social responsibility. His exile, undertaken to uphold his father's promise, is viewed as a sacrifice to preserve Dharma (Goldman & Goldman, 2004) [4]. The kingdom of Ayodha is depicted as an ideal monarchy where the rule of Dasaratha and Rama is governed by Dharma (Mathur, n.d.) [5].

Key principles derived from Rama's Rajdharma include:

- Primacy of public welfare
- Sovereign accountability to moral order
- State stability over personal emotions

These ideas, collectively imagined as Rama Rajya, have become intrinsic to Indian political thought and are invoked as metaphors for ethical, welfare-based governance.

Ethical Governance and Political Virtue

The Ramayana puts forward virtues such as truthfulness, compassion, and self-restraint, exemplifying that governance without personal ethics cannot sustain social order. This ethical orientation continues to influence contemporary expectations of political leadership in India, where personal integrity is often seen as inseparable from political legitimacy. Rajdharma in Ramayana manifested in the protection of subjects. "There are only two pious paths, as has been said by the sages, wherein is the Dharma established, namely, Ahimsa (non-injury) and Satya (Truth)" (Shah & Shah, 2021) [6].

4. Dharma and Rajdharma in the Mahabharata

Unlike the Ramayana, which presents a more unified moral universe, the Mahabharata embodies the complexity of political life. The Mahabharata calls itself a Dharma Samhita (Sahgal, 2021) [7]. It illustrates that dharma is often ambiguous and must be navigated with judgment, especially under conditions of conflict and moral dilemma (Hiltebeitel, 2001) [8]. Mathur, in her book "Governance and Administration in Mahabharata explained the complex interplay of duty and righteousness amidst conflict, offering profound lessons on justice and governance. The concept of Dharma revolved around the Kshatriya, or warrior caste. In the Mahabharata, Rajdharma is presented as the ethical core of political authority. It highlights that the legitimacy of a ruler rests not merely on power or lineage but on the consistent practice of justice, accountability, and moral restraint. A king is expected to act as the moral guardian of society, ensuring the protection of his subjects and the equitable functioning of the state. The epic frames leadership as a deeply ethical task, where personal desires must often be subordinated to the welfare of the people (Mathur, n.d.) [9].

Krishna's Statecraft and Contextual Ethics



Krishna represents a pragmatic yet ethically grounded approach to politics. His guidance to the Pandavas reflects the belief that adherence to rigid moral codes may undermine justice when confronting entrenched adharma. The Pandavas were known to represent Dharma, while the Kauravas represent adharma (Kovacs, 2012) [10]. Statecraft had several principles:

- Means may be flexible when protecting moral ends
- The ruler must prioritise the prevention of injustice
- Dharma sometimes requires strategic action, not passive virtue

This contextuality resonates strongly with the complexities of modern governance.

Vidur Niti and Administrative Ethics

Vidur Niti refers to the advice given to Dhritrashtra by Vidur in the Udyog Parva (Upadhyay, 2002) [11]. Vidur's counsel emphasises non-cruelty, wisdom, honesty, welfare orientation, and the moral duties of kings. These principles align with contemporary bureaucratic ethics, including impartiality, transparency, and public service.

Yudhishtira's Dharma Sankata

Yudhishtira's dilemmas represent the challenge of governing ethically in imperfect circumstances. He is torn between truth and strategic necessities, underscoring that political morality is often situational. For modern India, this highlights the need for balancing idealism with practical governance (Sahgal, 2020) [12].

5. Contemporary Influence of Dharma and Rajdharma in India

Dharma in Constitutional Morality

India's Constitution embodies a modern articulation of Dharma based on a moral order aimed at justice, dignity, and equality. Dr B. R. Ambedkar conceptualised constitutional morality as the new Rajdharma of Indian democracy. Dr Ambedkar defined Constitutional morality as the predominance of political power inclusive of all people. It is an essential condition of government to establish an atmosphere of administration where minorities are given the right to establish a free institution without obstructions (Bhongale, 2023) [13]. He argued that rulers and citizens alike must uphold principles such as:

- Liberty
- Equality
- Fraternity
- Justice

Dharma and Rajdharma in Indian Political Leadership

Political leaders of India have, since time immemorial, moved according to the ideals invoked in the epics. Mahatma Gandhi used "Rama Rajya" not in a religious sense but as an ethical framework of justice, equality, and welfare (Parel, 2016) [14]. In the modern world, Gandhi envisioned a society in which virtue, morality, and justice are the central concepts around which citizen-to-citizen and state-to-citizen interactions take place, which was only possible in Ram Rajya (Sahin & Mete, n.d.) [15].

Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged that Indian values are inherent in the concept of Dharma or righteousness, which has been mentioned in scriptures and texts since ancient times, and now part of everyday vocabulary. He highlighted the values handed down by ancient Indians in his writings and speeches. He believed in following the ideals and traditional temper of the nation while making realistic policies (Joshi, 2023) [16]. Later leaders, including A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, emphasising integrity, welfare orientation, and leadership responsibility, have reflections back to ancient epics.

Dharma, in its broadest sense, signifies the universal moral order, encompassing duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues, and the ethical codes that sustain individual and societal harmony. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, Dharma



transcends personal morality to embody a cosmic principle that maintains balance in the universe and society. In political leadership, Dharma serves as the foundational ethical compass, directing leaders to act justly, uphold truth, and promote the welfare of all citizens. Dharma and Rajdharma are central to understanding the ethical and moral framework that underpins Indian political leadership, forming a comprehensive guide that shapes the conduct, responsibilities, and legitimacy of rulers throughout history.

Constitutional reflections

The conceptual link between Rajdharma and the modern state is firmly established through the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs). The constitutional mandate for the State to strive for justice (social, economic, political) and promote public welfare (Article 38) serves as the non-enforceable, yet 'fundamental,' modern manifestation of the ancient ruler's duty to protect and nurture his subjects. Furthermore, various judicial judgments affirm the core values in the Preamble (Justice, Liberty, Equality), which draw their roots from the concept of Dharma.

Rajdharma, derived from Dharma, specifically addresses the duties and ethical obligations of rulers and political authorities. Rajdharma expects rulers to exercise power with fairness, impartiality, and self-restraint and protect their subjects from internal and external threats. It also puts emphasis on justice without bias and governance that promotes prosperity and social welfare. The rulers must place the common good above personal interests, emphasising selflessness and accountability. Rajdharma functions as a moral check on political authority, accountability and prevents despotism and abuse of power by binding rulers to an ethical code that aligns with dharma.

The integration of Dharma and Rajdharma creates a normative framework that visualises political leadership as a sacred trust in the political society. This framework holds that the legitimacy of rulers is dependent on their adherence to ethical principles and their commitment to the welfare of the people. This interplay between moral duty and political authority reflects a sophisticated understanding of governance that balances power with responsibility.

6. Continuing Relevance in Indian Polity and Society

Rajdharma today functions as a necessary standard of good governance. It also translates into adherence to constitutional values, safeguarding citizens' rights, and ensuring welfare. As Vajpayee famously said during the Gujarat riots, "Rajdharma requires that no citizen be treated differently." This invocation demonstrates the epics' continuing presence in political rhetoric. Although modern governance is constitutionally anchored, ideas of Dharma and Rajdharma still shape expectations of leadership, policy choices, and the moral evaluation of state actions. These concepts act as interpretive tools through which both citizens and political actors assess the legitimacy of governance practices. Judicial discourse also reflects dharmic principles such as judgments dealing with administrative fairness, environmental ethics, and custodial violence. Courts have invoked notions aligned with dharma, such as the duty to protect the weak, uphold justice, or ensure proportionality.

7. Conclusion

Dharma and Rajdharma, as articulated in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, constitute one of the richest traditions of political ethics in world history. Their influence persists in modern India as moral frameworks that shape political behaviour, public expectations, and constitutional values. Contemporary leaders, citizens, activists, and thinkers draw from these epics to articulate visions of justice, welfare, accountability, and ethical governance. Historically, Indian political thought has emphasised that the ruler is not above the law but subject to Dharma's dictates. This principle is evident in the concept of the king as a servant of dharma, tasked with maintaining social order and justice. The king's role extends beyond administration to embodying the virtues of compassion, courage, wisdom, and temperance, which collectively ensure sustainable and ethical governance

In contemporary terms, Dharma and Rajdharma continue to offer valuable insights into ethical leadership and governance. They emphasise that political power should be exercised with a sense of moral responsibility, transparency, and dedication to public service. These principles resonate with modern democratic ideals of accountability, justice, and the protection of human rights, illustrating the enduring relevance of Indian political philosophy. Dharma provides the broad ethical foundation that defines the moral universe within which political leadership operates, while Rajdharma translates these principles into concrete duties and conduct expected of rulers. Together, they form the cornerstone of



Indian political leadership, guiding rulers to govern with justice, integrity, and an unwavering commitment to the public good, thus ensuring that political authority is both legitimate and ethical.

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