

Revisiting Political Philosophy within Ancient Indian Knowledge System and Traditions: Key Elements

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Abstract

India's intellectual heritage, spanning millennia, encompasses a diverse and multifaceted knowledge system. This system, developed across fields like philosophy, science, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, arts, and governance, is deeply intertwined with the cultural, philosophical, and spiritual traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Its influence persists in contemporary knowledge and practices. This paper examines political philosophy within the Indian Knowledge System and its relevance to modern political and administrative practices. Political philosophy has historically been a cornerstone of India's intellectual tradition, emphasizing principles such as ethical leadership, a dharma-based administration, decentralized governance, sustainability, and the concept of a welfare state. It offers valuable perspectives on statecraft, policy formulation, administrative customs, and governance structures that have evolved over centuries. The ancient Gram Sabha system and the Sangha in Buddhist tradition serve as notable examples of democratic and decentralized practices in ancient India. Similarly, concepts like Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) and Antyodaya (the upliftment of the most vulnerable) illustrate models of inclusive development and welfare administration within India's historical political frameworks. Much like the broader Indian Knowledge System, ancient Indian political philosophy is a complex and varied domain, shaped by a multitude of texts, thinkers, and schools of thought, all influenced by India's rich cultural and spiritual values. These political philosophies are well-documented in ancient texts such as the Rigveda, Upanishads, Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and Mahabharata, as well as in Buddhist texts like the Vinaya Pitaka, Digha Nikaya, and Jataka stories, and Jain texts such as the Acharanga Sutra, Bhagavati Sutra, and Nitivakyamrita. Ancient Indian political philosophy offers a comprehensive and ethical approach to governance. By integrating key elements of this historical wisdom, India can enhance its governance and public administration framework to promote inclusive and equitable development. Furthermore, combining ancient Indian insights

with contemporary governance needs may provide valuable solutions to address global challenges related to governance, ethics, and sustainable development.

Keywords: political philosophy, Indian knowledge system, governance, administration, ethics, sustainability

Introduction:

Ancient Indian Political Philosophy comprises of Vedic folklore, the Vedantic idealism, the Jain and Buddhist visions and the gradual emergence of what A.T Embree (1992) refers to as formation of the Hindu way life reflecting the confluence of diverse streams of Indian civilization until first Muslim conquest of parts of India. The political ideas and state formation in India in the ancient phase may be illustrated by the different political ideas and structures prevalent in Vedic, post -Vedic, Mauryan and post Mauryan period of Indian history. Ideas and institutions of kingship, government and state during the period show a trajectory of evolution from society-centred political formations of multifunctional nature to political structures of more specialised functions centred on the king, government, and the state. However, Dharmashastra tradition was more prolific than Arthashastra tradition in classical writings. In Classical Hindu writings, the abstract purana or mythic mode of writing generally prevailed over positivist or factual itihās (history) mode of writing. Even Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is more of an abstract treatise on statecraft than significantly contextualized in time and place and dynasty (Singh, 2023). Nevertheless, one sees the faint beginning of political ideas in the Vedas, Upanishads and epics, and then their crystallization in the myths of creation of state in several Brahminical and Buddhist texts. While the *Rigveda* does not contain a systematic or theoretical approach to political philosophy in the way later texts like the *Manusmṛiti* or the *Mahabharata* might, it provides foundational ideas on governance, justice, social roles, and cosmic order. It suggests that governance is ideally a spiritual duty, with rulers, priests, and the community all playing interconnected roles in upholding the law of 'ṛta' to ensure the prosperity and harmony of society. The concept of 'ṛta' in the *Rigveda* can be viewed as a guiding principle of both cosmic and social order. It is the law that governs both the universe and human society. 'Ṛta' was associated with truth, law, and the right order of things, implying that just actions lead to cosmic and social stability. This connects with the role of kings and rulers, who were expected to ensure that justice and fairness prevailed in society, reflecting the cosmic order (Sondhi, 2023). Political angle in these earliest texts is suggestively implied and inferred from cosmological hierarchy.

Most significant texts in the culmination of Vedic literature are the Upanishads that developed Vedantic philosophical discourse. The political philosophy of the Upanishads is deeply intertwined with spiritual and ethical concerns. One of the central themes of the Upanishads is the idea of *Brahman* (the ultimate reality) and *Atman* (the self or soul) being one. It presents a vision of interconnected universe with a single, unifying principle behind the apparent diversity in the cosmos, any articulation of which is called Brahman. Brahman resides in the atman, the unchanging core of the human individual. This principle of non-duality is foundational

in understanding the Upanishadic approach to human society. While it does not outline specific political systems or institutions, it suggests that a just society is one in which rulers act with wisdom, virtue, and in alignment with cosmic order. The ultimate message is that political and social harmony arises when individuals realize their interconnectedness, align with universal principles, and practice self-discipline and wisdom.

Against Vedantic monistic idealism, Jain Philosophy assumed plurality of souls and emphasized experience in the material universe. Hemachandra in his poetic composition on the 24 Jain Tirthankaras and other eminent patriarchs and legendary rulers in Jain mythology portrayed the ideal king in terms of puritanical character, reformist legislation and given to charity and welfare of people. Such a ruler will establish his own era upon Earth, (Mahiviracharitra, 12. 59-770, excerpted in Embree 1992, pp. 84-85) Somadeva a Digambar Jain writer of 10th century portrays the characteristics of the ideal king in less puritanical and pompous garbs. In his, *Nitivakyamitra* (17.180-84) he says, “A true lord is he who is righteous, pure in lineage, conduct and associates brave and considerate in his behaviour. For the prosperity of his subject’s kingdom is the tree and the king the root. His order is a wall that none can climb. The king is the maker of times and his kingdom in the reigns in due season and all living things are at peace. In view of pluralist and non-violent temper of the Jain philosophy, their theory of kingship would appear to be less idealist in terms of political thought in less inclined to what is called realism in modern theories of international relations.

Like Jainism, Buddhism too took a reformist stance towards the ritualistic and aristocratic features of early Vedism. A major Buddhist text, *Digha Nika-ya* address the question of origin and evolutionary profile of the state. It postulates to get out of the evil and degenerate the ways of society. People gathered and reasoned and resolved: “Let us choose one man from among us, to dispense wrath, censure and banishment when they are right and proper, and give him a share of a rice in return.” (Digha Nikaya, 3.80 ff). Thus was the *Mahasammata* approved by the whole people *Mahajana* as Lord of the Fields (Khettnam) and hence Khatiya (Kshatriya). In the opinion of A.T Embree (1992) this is probably one of the world’s oldest versions of the contractual theory of state (Singh, 2023). Jataka Story also contains important insights into political philosophy, particularly in relation to governance, justice, and the welfare of society. Many Jataka tales feature the figure of a wise and just king, often demonstrating the ideal qualities of a ruler. These stories emphasize the importance of justice in governance. Rulers are depicted as upholders of the law and fairness, acting in the interest of truth and righteousness.

Thus, the Idea of ethical governance is deeply rooted in ancient philosophical, ethical, and administrative traditions of India. It encompasses principles from Vedic texts, Dharmashastras, Arthashastra, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist tradition and various other indigenous sources that guided the social, economic, and political order in India for centuries. The key element of Political Philosophy encompasses these multifaceted traditions are:

Dharma:

Ancient Indian political philosophy emphasizes that governance transcends mere administration, focusing

instead on the establishment of righteousness, justice, and comprehensive well-being. Dharma, serving as the core principle, provides the philosophical foundation for governance, upholding social order, justice, and ethical conduct. The term “Dharma” originates from the Sanskrit root “dhṛ” (धृ), signifying “to uphold” or “to sustain.” It encompasses righteousness, duty, law, and moral order within society. In the context of governance, Dharma constitutes the ethical framework that rulers and administrators are expected to adhere to, ensuring harmony and justice. It serves as a guiding force for both rulers (Rajadharma) and citizens (Prajā). Dharma has been a fundamental concept in Indian philosophy, ethics, and governance. Governance aimed to maintain a balance between Dharma (the code), Artha (economic prosperity), Kama (desires and well-being), and Moksha (liberation), the “tetrad” of Purushartha in Hindu philosophy. A competent ruler was expected to uphold these aspects while ensuring justice, fairness, and the well-being of all.

Sociologically, the “Varna system” is a distinctive feature of Hindu social structure, with each unit defined by social customs that regulate marriage, dietary habits, occupation, and other aspects of life. Ancient Indian texts generally portray society as a hierarchical structure, governed by caste (Varna) and duty (Dharma). While society was divided into groups, the ideal was that all individuals, regardless of their position, contribute to societal well-being. The Arthashastra and Manusmriti reflect a highly organized social order, where roles were often defined by Varna and occupation. Kautilya also stressed the importance of balancing different social groups to prevent marginalization. Notably, during the post-Vedic period, the state’s role shifted towards maintaining social stability, enabling various groups to live according to their respective Dharma (Embree, 1992, p. 207). Ancient knowledge systems also depict Dharma as a dynamic and contextual concept, unlike rigid laws. The Mahabharata’s assertion, “Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitah” (Dharma protects those who uphold it), highlights this adaptability. The essence of governance lies in interpreting and applying Dharma based on time, place, and circumstance. Dharma’s role as the foundation of governance is elaborated in various ancient texts. Vedas & Upanishads – Establish the moral and ethical foundations of governance. Ramayana & Mahabharata – Offer practical examples of Dharmic rule through the lives of Lord Rama and Yudhishtira. Arthashastra by Kautilya – Provides a strategic and administrative interpretation of Dharma in statecraft. Manusmriti & other Dharmashastras – Outline laws and codes of conduct for rulers and citizens.

Concept of Raja and Rajadharma (Dharma of a King/Ruler):

In ancient Indian philosophy, the role of the king (*Raja*) or sovereign extended beyond mere power; it was deeply rooted in ethical and religious obligations. The ideal ruler was envisioned as a protector and moral compass, embodying the concept of a *Chakravartin*, a universal sovereign dedicated to establishing social harmony through *dharma*. This *Rajadharma*, extensively detailed in texts like the Mahabharata, outlined the king’s duty to safeguard his subjects and uphold justice. A primary responsibility was shielding the realm from external threats and internal disorder. This encompassed maintaining law and order, ensuring security, and resolving conflicts. Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, a seminal work on statecraft, provided a pragmatic, and sometimes

stringent, approach to governance. It advocated for a strong, centralized authority led by a skilled ruler, emphasizing strategies for espionage, diplomacy, and warfare.

The king's role as a guardian of *Dharma* mandated just rule and the prioritization of public welfare. This involved equitable treatment of all subjects, regardless of social standing, and the establishment of a fair legal system. While compassion was essential, the enforcement of *Dandaniti* (punishment) was also crucial for maintaining order. Punishment, viewed as a corrective measure rather than retribution, aimed to preserve social stability. The *Arthashastra* stressed proportionate and just application of penalties.

Buddhist and Jain traditions also contributed to the ethical framework of kingship. The Buddhist concept of *Dhamma* emphasized compassionate governance and fairness, while Jainism, grounded in *Ahimsa* (non-violence), advocated for the protection of all life. Jain texts promoted just rulers who prioritized the welfare of all beings.

A crucial aspect of *Rajadharma* was balancing *Artha* (economic prosperity) with *Dharma* (ethical values). The ruler was tasked with fostering economic growth and ensuring equitable resource distribution. The *Arthashastra* provided detailed guidelines for economic management, highlighting the connection between a prosperous society and effective governance. The philosophical tradition of *Rajadharma* emphasized the moral and ethical dimensions of rulership. The ideal sovereign governed justly, prioritized public well-being, upheld righteousness, and maintained stability. The Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita explored the ethical dilemmas inherent in leadership, emphasizing the importance of acting according to one's *dharma*, even when faced with difficult choices. The core principle of *Rajadharma* was the alignment of governance with moral principles, fostering a society characterized by justice, peace, and ethical values. This framework, establishing duties and obligations, shaped ancient Indian political thought and continues to influence contemporary discussions on leadership and justice.

The notion of **Political Obligation** was extensively explored in ancient India. A cornerstone of this concept is *Dharma*, which encompasses moral and ethical duties relevant to both individual and societal roles. Within the political sphere, *Dharma* dictates that rulers must prioritize justice, protect their subjects, and ensure the state's prosperity. Conversely, citizens are expected to demonstrate loyalty and obey laws, while retaining the right to critique and oppose unjust governance.

Kautilya, in his *Arthashastra*, articulated that a king's primary duty (*Rajadharma*) is to safeguard the people's welfare through law enforcement, economic development, and national security. Citizens, in turn, are obligated to adhere to laws and contribute to stability. However, they are also granted the right to resist or depose a ruler who becomes oppressive or neglects their responsibilities. This highlights that, within the Indian tradition, the king is not considered above the law and is bound by rigorous moral and ethical standards. Corruption, exploitation, and unethical conduct are strictly prohibited. The ruler's actions must serve as a model for their subjects, and they are held accountable for their decisions. Texts like the *Manusmriti* and

Arthashastra indicate that citizens are not only permitted but expected to oppose a king who deviates from Raja Dharma.

Buddhism and Jainism offer distinct perspectives on political obligation, emphasizing personal ethics and governance rooted in non-violence (Ahimsa) and moral integrity. The *Tattvartha Sutra* of Jainism, for example, posits that while political authorities possess power, its exercise must align with the fundamental principles of Ahimsa and Satya (truth). Ancient Indian Political Philosophy presents political obligation as a complex interplay of *Dharma*, justice, and morality. It underscores the reciprocal responsibilities between rulers and citizens. The state is tasked with upholding justice, peace, and welfare, while citizens are expected to obey laws, act virtuously, and, when necessary, challenge or remove rulers who fail to fulfil their ethical and moral duties.

The nature of the Political System and Statecraft formed a crucial component of ancient Indian political philosophy. Governance and administration, as reflected in historical records, predominantly centered around monarchical structures, where the king (Raja) was ideally envisioned as a public servant.

The *Manusmriti* provides a detailed framework for this monarchical administration, positioning the king as the central figure. Specifically, it advocates for a centralized monarchical system, granting the king ultimate authority. The king served as the administrative head and final legal arbiter, his authority often perceived as divinely sanctioned, with a primary duty to ensure public welfare, encompassing peace, justice, and prosperity. Similarly, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* also places the king at the core of its governance model.

Kautilya conceptualized the state as an intricate, interconnected system of various components, including the king, ministers, officials, and the populace. Effective state function required the harmonious operation of these elements. A well-structured administration, with clearly defined roles for officials and bureaucrats, was deemed essential for maintaining order and prosperity. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (4th century BCE) offered comprehensive guidelines for effective governance, covering statecraft, administration, espionage, taxation, military strategy, and diplomacy. It emphasized the need for a pragmatic, wise, and morally upright ruler, while also advocating for the strategic use of diplomacy, espionage, and calculated force. The *Arthashastra* remains a significant treatise on statecraft, offering insights into leadership, governance, and political strategy.

While the king held supreme authority, the *Manusmriti* also underscored the importance of advisors and ministers. Kings were expected to consult with experienced individuals before making critical decisions, reflecting a form of consultative governance. This ensured that policies were carefully considered and just. Kings were often advised by a *Mantriparishad* (Council of Ministers), comprising scholars and experienced advisors.

Although ancient Indian governance was primarily monarchical, it contained elements that resonate with democratic principles, particularly in terms of collective decision-making, justice, consultation, and public participation. The *Rigveda* mentions early democratic assemblies like the *Sabha* and *Samiti*, where people

participated in governance. Republics, known as *Mahajanapadas* or *Ganasanghas*, were also prevalent, characterized by collective decision-making and rule by councils rather than singular monarchs. A system of decentralized governance, dividing administration into *Gram* (village), *Janapada* (province), and *Mahajanapadas* (state), was well-established. Village *Panchayats*, acting as autonomous units for local governance, played an integral role in representing local interests.

Vedic and Buddhist teachings both emphasized the community's role in decision-making. The Vedic *Sabha* served as a forum for crucial governance decisions, made by consensus among various community members. In the Buddhist *Sangha*, decisions were made through mutual consensus and collective participation of monks, reflecting values such as inclusivity, equality, and the collective will of the community.

The concept of **Welfare Administration** holds a significant position within Indian political Philosophy, emphasizing social justice, the provision of fundamental needs, and a proactive governmental role in enhancing public well-being. Kautilya, in his *Arthashastra*, advocated for a ruler's active involvement in state welfare, stressing resource management and economic prosperity as direct contributors to the people's welfare. The monarch was tasked with ensuring basic needs—food, security, and infrastructure—were met. However, this ancient perspective differs from modern welfare state notions, focusing more on a sustainable social structure rather than purely procedural welfare mechanisms.

Furthermore, the Indian Knowledge Traditions underscores inclusive development grounded in principles of equity, justice, and social inclusion. It prioritizes the upliftment of marginalized and disadvantaged groups, ensuring equal participation in economic, political, and social spheres. The *Arthashastra* illustrates this through state-regulated trade, taxation, and industry, promoting inclusivity. Dharma-based economies encouraged ethical trade practices. Indian philosophical and religious traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism, strongly emphasize equality and social inclusion. The distribution of wealth and resources is a recurring theme in Vedic and Buddhist texts, advocating for a cooperative social and economic model.

The Jain tradition promotes non-violence and universal equality, highlighting moral choices that influence both society and governance. These ideals contributed to democratic concepts of inclusivity and equality. Sarvodaya and Antyodaya highlight a holistic and inclusive approach to human welfare and development. Sarvodaya, with roots in Vedic, Upanishadic, and Buddhist philosophies, champions universal welfare, compassion, and shared societal responsibility. The Vedic concept of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” (the world is one family) reflects this, advocating for dignity and respect for all. Buddhist compassion (Karuna) and the ideal of Nirvana for collective benefit further emphasize communal welfare over individual success.

Antyodaya, emphasizing the upliftment of the most marginalized, draws from spiritual, philosophical, and social justice principles within Indian traditions. The Vedic and Upanishadic emphasis on the unity of all beings underscores the interconnectedness of individuals, regardless of social standing. The ancient Indian vision of social and economic justice emphasized universal access to necessities—food, shelter, education, and spiritual guidance.

Ancient Indian political philosophy is deeply interwoven with spiritual and moral principles. The ideals of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satya (truthfulness) served as fundamental guides for both those in power and their constituents. This philosophical tradition presents a nuanced interplay between statecraft, ethics, spirituality, and social structure. It emphasizes the significance of virtuous leadership, the maintenance of equity and order, and the collective welfare of the community. While acknowledging the presence of authority and social stratification, it also positioned the ruler as a public servant, bound by obligations and dharma. The diverse array of ideas found in texts such as the Mahabharata, Arthashastra, Ramayana, and Manusmriti continues to shape contemporary political and ethical discussions in India.

Governance, as conceptualized within this ancient framework, was comprehensive, morally grounded, and distributed. It was anchored in Dharma, economic prosperity, and justice, thereby establishing a robust foundation for societal stability and advancement. Concepts such as Rajadharma, collaborative decision-making, and ecological sustainability continue to inform modern governance approaches. Many facets of this historical governance are evident in India's Panchayati Raj system, models of ethical leadership, decentralized administration, and the ethical values enshrined in the Indian constitution. From the monarch's responsibility for the populace's well-being to the philosophical focus on social parity and the empowerment of marginalized groups, these principles continue to guide contemporary Indian welfare and development policies, ensuring that the needs of all citizens are addressed comprehensively and inclusively. In contemporary contexts, concepts like Sarvodaya and Antyodaya also resonate with global development objectives, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advocate for inclusive prosperity. This necessitates policies that proactively address the needs of the most vulnerable, whether concerning economic opportunities, healthcare, education, or social integration. Incorporating these principles into modern governance can foster a more ethical, equitable, and sustainable society, offering practical solutions to global governance and administrative challenges.

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