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Good Governance & Vedic Laws: Timeless Principles for Contemporary Administration

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive study undertakes a detailed examination of the concept of good governance as embedded within the Vedic legal and philosophical tradition. In an era where modern states grapple with challenges of corruption, administrative inefficiency, social inequality, and environmental degradation, this paper argues that the ancient Vedic corpus offers a profound and holistic framework for governance that remains remarkably relevant. By analyzing original Sanskrit ślokas from the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upaniṣads, and allied texts such as the Arthashastra and the Mahabharata's Shanti Parva, this paper explores the foundational principles of Vedic governance. The study examines key concepts including Rta (cosmic order) as the ultimate standard for just rule, Rāja-dharma (the king's duty), the Saptanga (seven limbs of the state), and the role of popular assemblies (Sabha and Samiti) in ensuring participatory governance. It further analyzes Vedic perspectives on administrative ethics, transparency, accountability, welfare, environmental stewardship, and conflict resolution. The analysis reveals that the Vedic model of governance was not merely concerned with maintaining order but with creating conditions for the holistic flourishing (abhyudaya) of all beings. The principles of consultation (mantra), consensus (sammati), and the subordination of royal power to Dharma anticipate modern ideals of constitutionalism, the rule of law, and participatory democracy. This paper concludes that a thoughtful engagement with Vedic governance principles can enrich contemporary administrative practice and offer a culturally resonant path towards more ethical, sustainable, and people-centric governance. This paper explores the profound connections between ancient Vedic principles of statecraft and contemporary concepts of good governance.

Keywords: Good Governance, Vedic Laws, Rāja-Dharma, Mahabharata, Arthashastra.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE VEDIC LEGACY

The concept of “good governance” has become a central concern of the contemporary world. International organizations, national governments, and civil society organizations increasingly emphasize principles such as participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus

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orientation, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability.¹ These principles, while articulated in modern language, address timeless questions: How should human societies be organized? What makes a ruler legitimate? How can power be exercised justly? What ensures the welfare of the people?

The ancient Vedic civilization of India grappled with these same questions and developed a sophisticated body of thought on governance that is remarkable for its depth, complexity, and enduring relevance. The Vedic conception of governance was not merely a set of pragmatic rules for administering a kingdom. It was a comprehensive philosophy rooted in a cosmic vision: the understanding that human governance must align with the fundamental order of the universe (Ṛta) and the eternal principles of righteousness (Dharma).²

This paper undertakes a systematic exploration of good governance as conceived in Vedic laws and allied texts. It draws upon authentic Sanskrit sources, including the Rigveda, Atharva Veda, Satapatha Brahmana, Aitareya Brahmana, Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Kauṭilya's Arthashastra, and the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. Through an analysis of original śloka, this study aims to demonstrate that the Vedic tradition offers not only a historical precedent but a living philosophy that can inform and enrich contemporary governance practices.

II. THE COSMIC FOUNDATION: ṚTA (ऋत) AS THE ULTIMATE STANDARD OF GOVERNANCE

At the foundation of the Vedic worldview lies the concept of Ṛta, the cosmic order that governs the universe. Ṛta is the principle that ensures the sun rises and sets, the seasons follow their course, and the rivers flow to the sea. It is the inherent lawfulness of existence itself. For Vedic thought, good governance is not merely a human convention but a participation in and alignment with this cosmic order.³

The Rigveda proclaims the primacy of Ṛta in terms that establish its relevance to all forms of order, including social and political order:

ऋतं च सत्यं चाभीद्धात्तपसोऽध्यजायत ।

¹ U.N. ECON. & SOC. COMM'N FOR ASIA & THE PAC., WHAT IS GOOD GOVERNANCE? (2009), <https://www.unescap.org/resources/what-good-governance>.

² Gopal Prasad & Sona Ojha, *Democracy and Governance Practices in Indian Scriptures*, 12 TIJER, no. 8, 2025, <https://tijer.org/tijer/papers/TIJER2508009.pdf>.

³ Krishna Panda, *The Concept of Ṛta in the Vedas: Cosmic Order and Its Ethical Dimensions*, NAT'L J. HINDI & SANSKRIT RSCH., May–June 2025, at 31, https://sanskritarticle.com/wp-content/uploads/08-60-Dr.Krishna.Panda_.pdf.

(From the blazing cosmic heat (tapas) were born Rta and Truth (Satya).)⁴

The intimate connection between Rta and Satya (truth) is significant. Truthfulness in speech and action is the human expression of cosmic order. A ruler who governs truthfully, whose words align with reality and whose actions align with promises, governs in accordance with Rta. A ruler who governs through falsehood and deception violates the very fabric of the cosmos.⁵

The gods themselves, particularly Varuṇa, are the guardians of Rta. The Rigveda describes Varuṇa as the sovereign who sees all and punishes transgressions against the cosmic order:

स सम्राड्वरुणो यश्च यातयते ।

The king, as the earthly sovereign, was understood to be the human counterpart to Varuṇa.⁶ His authority was legitimate only insofar as he acted as the guardian of Rta on earth. The Satapatha Brahmana explicitly draws this parallel, stating that the consecrated king becomes the human Varuṇa:

वैश्वदेवीं वा एष तद्वाचं वदति यदेनं राजानं वरुणं कुर्वन्ति ।

(He speaks, indeed, a speech relating to all the gods when they make him, the king, a Varuṇa.)⁷

This cosmic grounding of political authority has profound implications for good governance. It means that the ruler is not the source of law but its servant. The ruler is accountable not only to the people but to a higher, transcendent standard. This anticipates the modern concept of the rule of law, where even the highest authority is subject to law.⁸

III. THE PHILOSOPHY OF RĀJA-DHARMA (राजधर्म): DUTY AS THE BASIS OF AUTHORITY

The concept of Rāja-dharma, the duty of the king, is central to Vedic and post-Vedic political thought. Unlike modern theories that often emphasize the rights of rulers or the consent of the governed as the basis of authority, the Vedic tradition grounds kingship in duty. The king's authority is not a privilege to be enjoyed but a burden to be borne for the welfare of the people.⁹

⁴ WENDY DONIGER, *THE RIG VEDA: AN ANTHOLOGY* 280 (Penguin Books 1981) (translating Rig Veda 10.190.1).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ 1 RALPH T.H. GRIFFITH, *THE HYMNS OF THE RIGVEDA* 32 (E.J. Lazarus & Co. 1896) (translating Rig Veda 1.24.14).

⁷ JULIUS EGGELING, *THE SATAPATHA BRAHMANA* pt. IV, at 50 (Sacred Books of the East Vol. XLIII, Clarendon Press 1897) (translating Satapatha Brahmana 5.3.3.9).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Vandana Diya Sharma, *Rājadharmā: The Bharatiya Notion of Welfare State*, INDIA FOUND., <https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/rajadharm-the-bharatiya-notion-of-welfare-state/>.

The Aitareya Brahmana contains a remarkable passage from the royal consecration ceremony (rājasūya) that encapsulates this philosophy:

अहं प्रजानां राजास्मि प्रजा मह्यं राजास्मीति । एतद्वै राज्ञो राजसूयस्य रूपम् ।

(I am the king of the people; the people are king over me. This, indeed, is the nature of the royal consecration.)¹⁰ This verse articulates a profound reciprocal relationship. While the king holds sovereignty over the people, his sovereignty is conditional upon his service to them. The people, in a sense, are his sovereign masters, and his kingship is valid only insofar as he fulfills his duty to them. This is a remarkable anticipation of social contract theory, but with a crucial difference: the contract is not merely between the king and the people but is grounded in a cosmic order that both are obligated to uphold.¹¹

The Mahabharata, in its extensive treatment of Rāja-dharma in the Shanti Parva, emphasizes that the king exists for the people, not the people for the king:

प्रजानां पालनं राज्ञः परमो धर्म उच्यते ।

(The protection of the people is declared to be the highest duty of the king.)¹² This duty of protection (pālana) is comprehensive. It includes protection from external enemies, protection from internal crime and disorder, protection of the weak from the strong, and protection of the social and moral order. The king who fails in this duty loses his legitimacy and is compared to a eunuch, a cloud that gives no rain, or a father who does not protect his children.¹³

IV. THE SAPTĀṅGA THEORY (सप्ताङ्ग सिद्धान्त): THE SEVEN LIMBS OF THE STATE

One of the most sophisticated contributions of ancient Indian political thought to the theory of governance is the Saptāṅga theory, the conception of the state as consisting of seven constituent elements or “limbs” (aṅgas). This theory, elaborated in the Arthashastra and the Mahabharata, provides a holistic framework for understanding the state and its governance.¹⁴ The Arthashastra of Kauṭilya enumerates the seven elements as follows:

स्वाम्यमात्यजनपददुर्गकोशदण्डमित्राणि प्रकृतयः ।

¹⁰ ARTHUR BERRIEDALE KEITH, RIGVEDA BRAHMANAS: THE AITAREYA AND KAUSĪTAKI BRAHMANAS OF THE RIGVEDA 308 (Harvard Oriental Series Vol. 25, Harvard Univ. Press 1920) (translating Aitareya Brahmana 8.15).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² 8 KISARI MOHAN GANGULI, THE MAHABHARATA OF KRISHNA-DWAIPAYANA VYASA 127 (Bharata Press 1891) (translating Shanti Parva 56.44).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *The Saptanga Theory: Elements of State*, IILS INDIA, https://www.iilsindia.com/studymaterial/516108_1606765387.pdf.

(The constituent elements of the state are: the sovereign, the minister, the countryside, the fort, the treasury, the army, and the ally.)¹⁵ Each of these elements must be strong and well-functioning for the state to prosper. They are interdependent; weakness in any one limb affects the health of the entire body politic.

The Mahabharata similarly enumerates these elements, emphasizing their collective importance:

राजा राष्ट्रं च कोशश्च दुर्गं बलमथो सुहृत् । सप्तैताः प्रकृतयः सर्वलोकस्य सर्वदा ॥

(The king, the territory, the treasury, the fort, the army, and the ally, these seven are always the constituent elements of the entire realm.)¹⁶ This holistic conception of the state has important implications for good governance:

Interdependence: No single element can be neglected. A king with a strong army but an empty treasury cannot govern for long. A prosperous territory without a strong fort is vulnerable to attack. Good governance requires attention to all seven elements in their mutual relationship.

Beyond the Ruler: The state is not identical with the ruler. It is a complex entity with multiple components, each with its own importance. This anticipates modern conceptions of the state as an institution distinct from the government of the day.

Systemic Thinking: The Saptāṅga theory requires rulers to think systemically, understanding how policies affecting one element will impact others. This is a crucial dimension of strategic governance.¹⁷

V. PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE: THE ROLE OF SABHĀ (सभा) AND SAMITI (समिति)

One of the most striking features of early Vedic governance was the existence of popular assemblies that played a significant role in political life. The Sabhā and Samiti were two such institutions that ensured a degree of popular participation in governance.

The Samiti was a general assembly of the tribe or clan. It discussed matters of policy, elected the king in some cases, and served as a forum for public opinion.¹⁸ The Rigveda contains prayers for harmony and wisdom in the Samiti:

¹⁵ R.P. KANGLE, THE KAUTILIYA ARTHASASTRA pt. II, at 315 (Univ. of Bombay 1963) (translating Arthashastra 6.1.1).

¹⁶ GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 162 (translating Shanti Parva 59.78).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Political Organizations in the Rigvedic Period*, VISION IAS, https://cdn.visionias.in/value_added_material/741b1-political-organization-in-the-rig-vedic-period.

समितिः सम्मनीषा ।

(May the assembly be of one mind.)¹⁹ The Sabhā was a more select body, perhaps a council of elders or nobles. It functioned as a court of justice and an administrative council. The Atharva Veda contains a hymn praising the Sabhā and praying for understanding within it:

यथा नः सभासु सख्यानि जानत ।

(So that they may know our friendships in the assemblies.)²⁰ These assemblies served several crucial governance functions:

Deliberation: They provided a space for discussion and debate on matters of public importance.

Consent: The king's authority was not absolute but required the support and consent of these assemblies.

Accountability: The assemblies served as a check on royal power, holding the king accountable to customary law and public opinion.

Justice: The Sabhā functioned as a court, adjudicating disputes and ensuring justice.

The existence of these assemblies demonstrates that Vedic governance was not autocratic but contained significant participatory and deliberative elements. While these institutions evolved and their influence waned in later periods, they established a precedent for shared decision-making that resonates with modern ideals of democratic participation.²¹

VI. TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN VEDIC ADMINISTRATION

Transparency and accountability are cornerstones of contemporary good governance. Ancient Indian political thought placed great emphasis on these principles, recognizing that secrecy and unchecked power lead to misrule.²²

A. Transparency in Royal Affairs

The king was expected to be accessible to his subjects and to conduct his affairs in a manner that inspired public confidence. The Arthashastra advises the king to personally attend to the complaints of his people:

¹⁹ 4 GRIFFITH, *supra* note 6, at 240 (translating Rig Veda 10.191.3).

²⁰ MAURICE BLOOMFIELD, HYMNS OF THE ATHARVA-VEDA 55 (Sacred Books of the East Vol. XLII, Clarendon Press 1897) (translating Atharva Veda 7.12.1).

²¹ *Id.*

²² Anita Das, *Good Governance in Ancient Indian Political Thought*, INT'L J. CREATIVE RSCH. THOUGHTS, Feb. 2024, <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2402610.pdf>.

प्रजासुखे सुखं राज्ञः प्रजानां च हिते हितम् । नात्मप्रियं हितं राज्ञः प्रजानां तु प्रियं हितम् ॥

(In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness; in their welfare lies his welfare. What is dear to himself is not beneficial to the king, but what is dear to his subjects is beneficial.)²³ This verse subordinates the king's personal preferences to the welfare of the people. A ruler who governs for his own pleasure rather than the people's welfare fails in his fundamental duty.²⁴

B. Accountability Through Spies and Reports

The Arthashastra famously advocates for an extensive network of spies (gūḍhapuruṣa) who would report on the conduct of officials throughout the kingdom. While this may seem intrusive from a modern privacy perspective, its purpose was accountability, to ensure that officials were performing their duties honestly and effectively.

गूढपुरुषैः सर्वाः प्रकृतीः परीक्षेत ।

(He should examine all the constituent elements of the state through secret agents.)²⁵ This systematic oversight was designed to prevent corruption, abuse of power, and administrative failure. It reflects an understanding that good governance requires mechanisms to hold power accountable.²⁶

C. Public Audiences and Grievance Redressal

The king was expected to hold daily public audiences where any subject could approach him with complaints or petitions. The Arthashastra prescribes that the king should spend the early part of each day hearing cases and receiving reports:

प्रातःकाल्ये सभ्यानां व्यवहारान् दर्शयेत् ।

(In the forenoon, he should attend to the legal cases of the members of the assembly.)²⁷ This accessibility was not merely symbolic. It was a practical mechanism for ensuring that justice was done and that the king remained connected to the realities of his people's lives.²⁸

²³ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 44 (translating Arthashastra 1.19.34) (one of the most frequently quoted verses from the text).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 23 (translating Arthashastra 1.13.1).

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 41 (translating Arthashastra 1.19.1).

²⁸ *Id.*

VII. ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: THE QUALITIES OF THE IDEAL RULER

The Vedic and Dharmashastra traditions devote considerable attention to the personal qualities required of a good ruler. These qualities extend beyond administrative competence to encompass moral character, self-discipline, and spiritual wisdom.²⁹

A. Self-Discipline (Ātmavinaya)

The Arthashastra opens with the assertion that the king's self-discipline is the foundation of all good governance:

योगक्षेमसाधनाः प्रकृतयः । तासां योगक्षेमं राजा वर्तयति । तस्य वृत्तिर्दण्डः । तस्य नयतीत्यर्थः ।

(The constituent elements of the state are the means of securing security and prosperity. The king secures the security and prosperity of these elements. His instrument is punishment. The meaning is that he guides them.)³⁰ The king's ability to wield the rod of punishment (daṇḍa) justly depends on his own self-discipline. A king who cannot control his own passions (lust, anger, greed, pride) cannot be trusted to control others. The Mahabharata emphasizes this point:

यथा हि पुरुषः स्वेषु दोषेषु नियमं कृतः । तथा परेषु कर्तव्यं नियमं पृथिवीपते ॥

(As a man imposes restraint on his own faults, O lord of earth, so should he impose restraint on others.)³¹ This principle anticipates the modern understanding that ethical leadership begins with personal integrity.

B. The Seven Faults to Avoid

The Arthashastra identifies seven faults (vyasanāni) that destroy a king and his kingdom:

मृगयाक्षोदिवास्वप्नः परिवादः स्त्रियो मदः । तौर्यत्रिकं वृथाट्या च सप्त व्यसनगणः स्मृतः ॥

(Hunting, gambling, sleeping during the day, slander, women, intoxication, and indulgence in music and dance, these are remembered as the sevenfold group of vices.)³² These vices are destructive because they distract the ruler from his duties, consume his resources, and impair his judgment. Good governance requires rulers to avoid such distractions and remain focused on their responsibilities.³³

²⁹ *The Ideal King in Kautilya's Arthashastra*, POLSCI INST., <https://polsci.institute/indian-political-thought-1/ideal-king-kautilyas-arthashastra/>.

³⁰ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 6 (translating Arthashastra 1.4.3).

³¹ GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 133 (translating Shanti Parva 57.12).

³² KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 391 (translating Arthashastra 8.3.42) (these vices are elaborated in the context of the king's personal conduct).

³³ *Id.*

C. The Ideal King in the Shanti Parva

The Mahabharata's Shanti Parva provides a detailed portrait of the ideal king. He should be:

श्रुतवृत्तोपसम्पन्नः सत्यधर्मपरायणः । प्रजाहिते निविष्टात्मा शत्रुभिश्चापराजितः ॥

(Endowed with learning and good conduct, devoted to truth and righteousness, dedicated to the welfare of his subjects, and unconquered by enemies.)³⁴ This ideal combines intellectual cultivation (śruta), ethical character (vṛtta), commitment to truth (satya) and righteousness (dharma), dedication to public welfare (prajāhita), and strength in the face of external threats.³⁵

VIII. THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS: COLLECTIVE WISDOM IN DECISION-MAKING

The Vedic tradition recognized that even the most capable ruler cannot govern alone. The Mantri-Pariṣad (council of ministers) was an essential institution for ensuring wise and balanced decision-making.³⁶

A. Composition of the Council

The Arthasastra advises the king to appoint ministers based on their character and competence, not merely their loyalty or connections:

अमात्यान् सप्ताष्टौ च सहधर्मेण स्थापयेत् । तैः सह चिन्तयेत् कार्याणि ।

(He should appoint seven or eight ministers of noble lineage and character. He should deliberate on state affairs with them.)³⁷ The number of ministers (seven or eight) is significant, allowing for diverse perspectives while remaining small enough for effective deliberation.

B. The Deliberative Process

The Arthasastra outlines a sophisticated process for deliberation:

एकेन सह मन्त्रयेत न कार्यसिद्धिः । द्वाभ्यां सह मन्त्रयेत न निश्चयः । त्रिभिः सह मन्त्रयेत स्यान्निश्चयः ।

(Deliberation with one [minister] does not lead to successful action. Deliberation with two does not lead to a firm decision. Deliberation with three leads to a firm decision.)³⁸ This reflects an understanding that effective decision-making requires a balance of perspectives. Too few voices

³⁴ GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 124 (translating Shanti Parva 56.5).

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *The King and His Counsel*, WISDOM LIBRARY, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/article/murukan-in-cankam-literature/d/doc628484.html>.

³⁷ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 34 (translating Arthasastra 1.15.42).

³⁸ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 33 (translating Arthasastra 1.15.30).

lead to narrow thinking; too many can lead to indecision. The ideal is a small group of trusted advisors who can engage in thorough discussion and reach consensus.³⁹

C. Confidentiality in Deliberations

The Arthasastra places great emphasis on maintaining the confidentiality of deliberations:

मन्त्रभेदो हि सर्वेषां कार्याणामतिवर्तते । तस्मान्मन्त्रं न भिन्द्यात्कथञ्चन ॥

(Leakage of counsel defeats all undertakings. Therefore, one should never disclose counsel.)⁴⁰

This is not about secrecy for its own sake but about ensuring that policy deliberations are not undermined by premature disclosure, manipulation, or interference.⁴¹

IX. WELFARE STATE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE KING AS PROTECTOR AND PROVIDER

The Vedic conception of the king's duty extended beyond maintaining order to actively promoting the welfare of all sections of society, particularly the vulnerable.

A. Protection of the Vulnerable

The Mahabharata explicitly commands the king to protect those who cannot protect themselves:

बालवृद्धकृशातुरान् रक्षेत् ।

(He should protect the children, the aged, the weak, and the afflicted.)⁴² This duty reflects the understanding that a just society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members. The king's protection was not merely a matter of charity but of justice.⁴³

B. Provision for the Destitute

The Arthasastra prescribes state support for those unable to support themselves:

अनाथवृद्धकृशातुरान् प्रसूताश्च स्त्रियो रक्षेत् । तेषामन्नपानमौषधं च दद्यात् ।

(He should protect the helpless, the aged, the weak, the afflicted, and women who have given birth. He should give them food, drink, and medicine.)⁴⁴ This is a remarkable anticipation of the modern welfare state, recognizing that the state has a positive obligation to provide for the basic needs of those who cannot provide for themselves.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 36 (translating Arthasastra 1.15.60).

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 127 (translating Shanti Parva 56.45).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 57 (translating Arthasastra 2.1.26).

C. Relief in Times of Calamity

The Arthasastra also provides for state relief during natural calamities:

दुर्भिक्षे राजा प्रजानामन्नं दद्यात् ।

(During famine, the king should give food to the people.)⁴⁵ The king was expected to open the royal granaries, remit taxes, and undertake public works projects to provide employment and sustenance during times of scarcity.

D. Fair Taxation

The principle of fair and reasonable taxation was firmly established. The Mahabharata compares the king's tax collection to the bee gathering honey:

अतो राजा भवेल्लोके मधुवत् संचयेत् करान् ।

(Therefore, the king in this world should collect taxes like a bee [collects honey].)⁴⁶ Just as the bee gathers pollen without destroying the flower, the king should collect taxes without oppressing the people or destroying their capacity to produce wealth. The Arthasastra echoes this principle, advising the king to be like a nursing mother who gives more than she takes.⁴⁷

X. ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE: REGULATING TRADE, COMMERCE, AND WEALTH

The Vedic and Arthasastra traditions contain detailed provisions for regulating economic activity to ensure fairness, prevent exploitation, and promote prosperity.

A. Regulation of Markets

The Arthasastra establishes the office of the Sannidhātā (treasurer) and Samāhartā (collector-general) to oversee economic activities.⁴⁸ It prescribes regulations for weights and measures, quality control, and pricing:

तुलामानं प्रमाणं च सर्वेषामेव कारयेत् । अधिष्ठानेषु चैतेषां रक्षां कुर्यात्प्रयत्नतः ॥

(He should cause standardized weights and measures to be made for all commodities. He should diligently protect them in the marketplaces.)⁴⁹ This standardization protected consumers from fraud and ensured fair dealing in commercial transactions.

⁴⁵ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 246 (translating Arthasastra 4.3.17).

⁴⁶ GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 409 (translating Shanti Parva 87.21).

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Ponnuraj, *Ancient Indian Economic Systems: A Study of Indigenous Trade, Governance, and Global Connections* (2025), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394483493>.

⁴⁹ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 44 (translating Arthasastra 1.19.34).

B. Prevention of Adulteration

The Arthasastra prescribes severe penalties for adulteration:

सारभाण्डस्य मात्रया हासे वृद्धौ च मूल्यहासवृद्धिः । असारभाण्डे द्वादशपणो दण्डः ।

(For deficiency or excess in the quantity of essential commodities, there shall be a corresponding reduction or increase in price. For adulteration of non-essential commodities, the fine is twelve paṇas.)⁵⁰ These regulations protected consumers and maintained trust in the marketplace, an essential condition for economic prosperity.

C. Protection of Consumers and Workers

The Arthasastra also contains provisions protecting consumers from overcharging and workers from exploitation:

क्रेतृवणिजां विवादे यथोक्तं कारयेत् ।

(In disputes between buyers and sellers, he should cause [settlement] according to the prescribed rules.)⁵¹ This established a framework for commercial justice that protected the rights of all parties.

XI. ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE: STEWARDSHIP OF NATURE IN VEDIC TRADITION

The Vedic tradition's reverence for nature translated into practical principles of environmental governance that are remarkably relevant today.

A. Protection of Forests and Wildlife

The Arthasastra establishes protected forests (abhayāranya) where hunting and tree-cutting were prohibited:

अभयारण्यानि च कारयेत् । तेषु प्राणिनामवधः ।

(He should create protected forests. In them, there should be no killing of living beings.)⁵² These protected areas served as sanctuaries for wildlife and preserved biodiversity, an ancient anticipation of modern wildlife sanctuaries and national parks.

⁵⁰ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 78 (translating Arthasastra 2.7.1).

⁵¹ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 259 (translating Arthasastra 4.2.19).

⁵² KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 179 (translating Arthasastra 3.1.1).

B. Penalties for Environmental Damage

The Arthasastra prescribes fines for damaging trees and polluting the environment:

समाजप्राणिसङ्घानां वास्तुकर्मविधौ तरुच्छेदने द्विपञ्चाशत्पणो दण्डः ।

(For cutting down trees in places of public resort, congregations of living beings, or in prescribed sites for building, the fine is fifty-two paṇas.)⁵³ This provision recognizes that trees in public spaces have value beyond private property and deserve legal protection.

C. Water Management

The Arthasastra also addresses water management, recognizing the importance of this resource for agricultural prosperity:

सेतुबन्धानां करणं रक्षणं च कुर्यात् ।

(He should construct and maintain dams and irrigation works.)⁵⁴ The state's responsibility for water infrastructure (building reservoirs, canals, and dams) was clearly recognized as essential for agricultural prosperity and food security.

XII. JUSTICE AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION: THE PURSUIT OF NYĀYA (न्याय)

The administration of justice was a central function of governance in the Vedic tradition. The pursuit of Nyāya (justice) was understood as the application of Dharma to specific disputes.

A. The King as Chief Justice

The king was the final authority in matters of justice, but he was expected to adjudicate in accordance with Dharma, not personal whim. The Arthasastra advises:

धर्मस्थाः सभ्याश्च व्यवहारान् दर्शयेयुः ।

(The judges and members of the assembly should decide legal cases.)⁵⁵ The king, while present, was expected to respect the judgments of learned judges (dharmastha) and the assembly (sabhā).

B. Hierarchy of Courts

Ancient Indian jurisprudence recognized a hierarchy of courts, from family tribunals to village councils to guild courts to royal courts. The Yājñavalkya Smṛti describes this hierarchy:

कुलानि श्रेणयो ग्रामाः सङ्घा अध्यक्षनिर्मिताः । त एते व्यवहारस्य मूलं पूर्वं प्रकल्पिताः ॥

⁵³ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 61 (translating Arthasastra 2.2.4).

⁵⁴ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 228 (translating Arthasastra 3.19.20).

⁵⁵ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 56 (translating Arthasastra 2.1.20).

(Family assemblies, guilds, village assemblies, and bodies appointed by the king, these were established in ancient times as the foundations of legal procedure.)⁵⁶ This hierarchy allowed disputes to be resolved at the most appropriate level, reserving the king's court for the most serious or complex cases.

C. Principles of Natural Justice

The ancient texts also recognized principles of natural justice. The Mahabharata advises:

न पक्षपाती भविता न च वैरेण पश्यति ।

(The judge should not be partial, nor should he look with enmity [upon any party].)⁵⁷ Impartiality and freedom from bias were essential qualities of a judge.

XIII. CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND INTERSTATE RELATIONS: THE MAṆḌALA THEORY

The Arthasastra is famous for its Maṇḍala (circle of states) theory, which provides a sophisticated framework for understanding interstate relations and conducting foreign policy.

A. The Circle of States

Kauṭilya envisions the political landscape as consisting of concentric circles of states, with the king's own state at the center:

विजिगीषुः शत्रुर्मित्रमुदासीनः परिग्रहः ।

(The would-be conqueror, the enemy, the ally, the neutral, and the intervening king [are the constituents of the circle].)⁵⁸ This framework enables strategic analysis of the relative positions of different states and the formulation of appropriate policies.

B. The Sixfold Policy

The Arthasastra also articulates six modes of foreign policy (ṣaḍguṇya):

सन्धिर्विग्रह आसनं यानं संश्रयद्वैधीभावः ।

(Treaty, hostility, staying quiet, marching, seeking shelter, and duplicity [with a superior power].)⁵⁹ These six policies provide a repertoire of strategic options, allowing the ruler to respond flexibly to changing circumstances.

⁵⁶ SRISA CHANDRA VIDYARNAVA SASTRI, THE YAJNAVALKYA SMRITI 152 (Panini Office 1918) (translating Yājñavalkya Smṛti 2.30).

⁵⁷ GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 127 (translating Shanti Parva 56.46).

⁵⁸ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 317 (translating Arthasastra 6.2.13).

⁵⁹ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 323 (translating Arthasastra 7.1.2).

C. Diplomacy and Negotiation

The Arthashastra emphasizes the importance of diplomacy and negotiation before resorting to war:

उपायैश्चतुर्भिः सामदानदण्डभेदैः कार्याणि साधयेत् ।

(He should accomplish his objectives through the four means: conciliation, gifts, punishment, and division.)⁶⁰ The preference for peaceful means (*sāma* and *dāna*) over force (*daṇḍa*) reflects a sophisticated understanding of statecraft that seeks to achieve objectives with minimal cost and conflict.

XIV. CORRUPTION AND ITS PREVENTION: ANCIENT INSIGHTS ON ADMINISTRATIVE INTEGRITY

Corruption is a perennial challenge of governance. The ancient Indian texts display a keen awareness of this problem and offer various strategies for its prevention.

A. The Many Forms of Corruption

The Arthashastra provides a remarkably detailed catalog of corrupt practices by public officials:

यथोदरेषु मत्स्या दुष्करं ग्रस्यन्ते । एवं कर्मचारिणः कोशमवेक्षन्ते ।

Yathodareṣu matsyā duṣkaram grasyante | evaṁ karmacāriṇaḥ kośamavekṣante ||

(Just as it is impossible to know when fish swimming in water drink water, so it is impossible to know when government servants, in the discharge of their duties, appropriate money.)⁶¹ This famous analogy acknowledges the inherent difficulty of detecting corruption and the need for constant vigilance.

B. Strategies for Prevention

The Arthashastra prescribes multiple strategies to prevent corruption:

Adequate Salaries. Officials should be paid sufficiently so they have no excuse to seek illicit income:

वेतनभृताः कर्मचारिणः स्युः । तेषामलाभे कोशोपघातः ॥

(Government servants should be paid salaries. If they are not paid, they will embezzle from the

⁶⁰ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 107 (translating Arthashastra 2.10.47).

⁶¹ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 98 (translating Arthashastra 2.9.32) (this famous analogy appears in the context of discussing the difficulty of detecting corruption among revenue officials).

treasury.)⁶²

Surprise Inspections. Officials should be subject to unannounced inspections by undercover agents:

गूढपुरुषैः सर्वान्कर्मचारिणः परीक्षेत ।

(He should examine all government servants through secret agents.)⁶³

Rotation of Officials. Frequent rotation prevents officials from becoming entrenched in positions where they can develop corrupt networks.

Severe Punishment. Corrupt officials should be punished severely to deter others:

कोशापहारे वधो दण्डः ।

(For embezzlement from the treasury, the punishment is death.)⁶⁴

C. The Ethics of Public Service

Beyond these mechanical safeguards, the tradition emphasizes the ethical dimension of public service. The Mahabharata counsels that a public servant should be like a lamp that consumes its own oil to give light to others:

यथा दीपः स्वतेजोभिर्वर्तिकातैलसंयुतः । प्रकाशयति चात्मानं तथा राजा प्रजाः सदा ॥

(As a lamp, through its own flame, wick, and oil, illuminates both itself and others, so should the king always illuminate his subjects.)⁶⁵ The public servant's role is to serve, not to exploit; to illuminate, not to obscure.

XV. EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN GOVERNANCE

The Vedic tradition places immense value on knowledge (vidyā) as essential to good governance. The king and his officials were expected to be well-educated and to surround themselves with learned advisors.

A. The King's Education

The Arthashastra prescribes an extensive curriculum for the prince's education, including the Vedas, philosophy, economics, and political science:

आन्वीक्षिकी त्रयी वार्ता दण्डनीतिश्चेति विद्याः ।

⁶² KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 283 (translating Arthashastra 5.3.1).

⁶³ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 97 (translating Arthashastra 2.9.24).

⁶⁴ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 254 (translating Arthashastra 4.1.65).

⁶⁵ GANGULI, *supra* note 12, at 127 (translating Shanti Parva 56.47).

(Philosophy, the three Vedas, economics, and political science, these are the sciences.)⁶⁶ This comprehensive education was designed to produce rulers capable of wise and just governance.

B. The Role of the Purohita (पुरोहित)

The Purohita (royal priest) was not merely a religious functionary but a key advisor on matters of state. The Arthashastra describes his role:

पुरोहितमुदितोदितं वृत्तशास्त्रज्ञं दैवे मानुषे च कर्मणि कुर्वीत ।

(He should appoint a Purohita who is well-versed in the Vedas and the sciences, and who is skilled in both divine and human affairs.)⁶⁷ The Purohita's knowledge of both the sacred and the secular made him an invaluable advisor, ensuring that governance was aligned with both cosmic order and practical realities.

C. The Council of Learned Men

The king was also expected to consult with a council of learned men (vidvat-pariṣad) on matters of Dharma and policy. This ensured that decisions were informed by the best available knowledge and wisdom.

XVI. DEFENSE AND SECURITY: PROTECTING THE REALM AND ITS PEOPLE

Protecting the realm from external threats and internal disorder was a primary duty of the king. The Vedic tradition contains sophisticated thinking on defense and security.

A. The Army (Daṇḍa)

The army was one of the seven limbs of the state. The Arthashastra provides detailed guidance on the organization, training, and deployment of the military:

बलं चतुरङ्गं हस्त्यश्वरथपदातिम् ।

(The army consists of four divisions: elephants, cavalry, chariots, and infantry.)⁶⁸

B. Fortifications (Durga)

Forts were essential for defense. The Arthashastra describes different types of forts (water forts, mountain forts, desert forts, and forest forts) and their strategic advantages:

दुर्गाणि चतुर्विधानि औदकं पार्वतं धान्वनं वनं च ।

⁶⁶ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 3 (translating Arthashastra 1.2.1).

⁶⁷ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 14 (translating Arthashastra 1.9.9).

⁶⁸ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 133 (translating Arthashastra 2.18.1).

(Forts are of four kinds: water forts, mountain forts, desert forts, and forest forts.)⁶⁹

C. Internal Security

Internal security was equally important. The Arthashastra prescribes measures to prevent and detect crime, including a network of informants and regular patrols:

राष्ट्रस्य मध्ये गूढपुरुषाः सञ्चरन्तः चौरान् परीक्षेरन् ।

(Secret agents moving within the country should investigate thieves.)⁷⁰

XVII. CRISIS MANAGEMENT: FAMINE, FLOOD, AND EMERGENCY ADMINISTRATION

The ancient texts also address the governance challenges posed by natural calamities and other emergencies.

A. Famine Relief

The Arthashastra prescribes comprehensive measures for famine relief:

दुर्भिक्षे राजा प्रजानामन्नं दद्यात् । कोशाद्वा धान्यं वा ।

(During famine, the king should give food to the people, either from the treasury or from the granaries.)⁷¹ Other measures included remitting taxes, undertaking public works to provide employment, and encouraging migration to areas with surplus food.

B. Epidemic Management

The Arthashastra also addresses the management of epidemics:

रोगोपसर्गे वैद्यान् दद्यादौषधानि च ।

(During epidemics, he should provide physicians and medicines.)⁷²

C. Emergency Powers

The texts recognize that emergencies may require extraordinary measures, but they emphasize that such measures must be temporary and aimed at restoring normalcy.

XVIII. THE ROLE OF THE PUROHITA (पुरोहित): SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE IN STATECRAFT

The Purohita occupied a unique position in ancient Indian governance, serving as the link

⁶⁹ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 66 (translating Arthashastra 2.3.1).

⁷⁰ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 249 (translating Arthashastra 4.4.3).

⁷¹ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 246 (translating Arthashastra 4.3.17).

⁷² KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 247 (translating Arthashastra 4.3.21).

between the temporal and spiritual realms.

A. Qualifications of the Purohita

The Arthashastra specifies the qualifications required for this crucial office:

पुरोहितमुदितोदितं वृत्तशास्त्रज्ञं दैवे मानुषे च कर्मणि कुर्वीत । तमृषयोऽत्रेरिव राजानमनुवर्तेरन् ।

(He should appoint a Purohita who is well-versed in the Vedas and the sciences, and who is skilled in both divine and human affairs. The king should follow him as the seers follow Atri.)⁷³

B. Functions of the Purohita

The Purohita's functions included:

Ritual Guidance: Performing sacrifices and rituals to ensure cosmic harmony and divine favor.

Ethical Counsel: Advising the king on matters of Dharma and ethical conduct.

Crisis Management: Providing spiritual counsel during times of crisis.

Legitimacy: Conferring legitimacy on the king's rule through ritual consecration.

The presence of the Purohita ensured that governance was not merely a secular exercise but was grounded in spiritual wisdom and cosmic alignment.

XIX. LIMITATIONS AND CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Any attempt to apply ancient governance principles to contemporary contexts must acknowledge certain limitations:

Historical Context: The Vedic political system was a product of its time, a pre-industrial, agrarian society with a hierarchical social structure (varṇa system). Many of its specific provisions are not directly transferable to modern, democratic, egalitarian societies.

Monarchical Framework: The Vedic model is essentially monarchical. While it contains participatory elements (Sabhā, Samiti), it is not democratic in the modern sense. Adapting its principles to democratic governance requires careful translation.

Social Hierarchy: The tradition's acceptance of social hierarchy (varṇa-dharma) is incompatible with modern constitutional values of equality. A contemporary appropriation must reject these hierarchical elements while retaining the universal ethical principles.

Pluralism: Ancient India was pluralistic, but its governance framework was predominantly Brahmanical. Modern governance must accommodate multiple religious and cultural perspecti-

⁷³ KANGLE, *supra* note 15, at 14 (translating Arthashastra 1.9.9–10).

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Interpretive Challenges: The texts are ancient and require careful interpretation. Literal readings can be misleading; the underlying principles must be discerned.

Despite these limitations, the philosophical principles underlying Vedic governance (the rule of Dharma, the duty of the ruler, the importance of consultation, the emphasis on welfare, and the holistic conception of the state) remain profoundly relevant.

XX. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A DHARMIC MODEL OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

This comprehensive examination has demonstrated that the Vedic tradition contains a rich and sophisticated philosophy of governance that anticipates many principles of modern good governance while offering unique insights rooted in a cosmic and ethical worldview.

The key principles of Vedic good governance can be summarized as follows:

Cosmic Alignment: Governance must be aligned with Rta, the fundamental order of the universe. This grounds politics in a transcendent standard of truth and righteousness.

Duty-Based Authority: The ruler's authority derives from duty (rāja-dharma), not privilege. The king exists for the people, not the people for the king.

Holistic Conception of the State: The Saptāṅga theory recognizes the state as a complex organism with interdependent elements, requiring systemic thinking in governance.

Participatory Institutions: The Sabhā and Samiti provided forums for deliberation and consent, anticipating modern participatory governance.

Transparency and Accountability: The king was expected to be accessible, and officials were subject to scrutiny through multiple mechanisms.

Ethical Leadership: The ruler's personal character (self-discipline, truthfulness, compassion) was considered foundational to good governance.

Welfare Orientation: The king had a positive duty to protect the vulnerable and provide for those in need.

Environmental Stewardship: Nature was revered and protected, with legal provisions for forests, wildlife, and water resources.

Justice and Fair Procedure: The administration of justice was guided by principles of impartiality, due process, and hierarchy of courts.

Strategic Wisdom: The Maṇḍala theory and sixfold policy provided frameworks for wise statecraft and international relations.

In an era of global challenges (climate change, inequality, corruption, political polarization, and ethical confusion), the Vedic tradition offers a vision of governance that is holistic, ethical, and grounded in a profound understanding of the relationship between human society and the cosmic order. It is a reminder that good governance is not merely about efficient administration but about creating conditions for the flourishing of all beings, human and non-human, present and future.

The Taittirīya Upaniṣad concludes its instruction to the graduating student with a benediction that captures the ultimate purpose of all governance:

सह नावतु । सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं करवावहे । तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहे ॥

(May He protect us both together. May He nourish us both together. May we work together with great vigor. May our study be brilliant. May we never hate each other.)⁷⁴

This vision of harmony, collaboration, and mutual flourishing remains the ultimate aspiration of good governance, a vision that the Vedic tradition articulates with enduring power and relevance.

⁷⁴ PATRICK OLIVELLE, *THE EARLY UPANIṢADS* 179 (Oxford Univ. Press 1998) (translating Taittirīya Upaniṣad 1.1.1; the Śānti Pāṭha that begins the Upaniṣad).

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