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Analyzing the Role of Dharma in Shaping Ancient Indian Political Thought

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the examination of ancient Indian political science, shedding light on the synthesis of political ideals and Dharma within the governance principles of contemporary rulers. Ancient political thinkers like Manu, Yagvalkavya, and Kautilya extensively discuss the incorporation of Dharma into political and administrative frameworks, providing explicit guidelines for royal duties. Dharma serves as a moral compass, restraining rulers from power misuse and guiding them towards righteous conduct. Despite the absence of stringent legal constraints, Dharma's ethical and moral principles wield more influence than constitutional ideals, shaping the behaviour of rulers. The concept of Rajdharma emerges, defining the duties of rulers and warriors. Guided by Dharma, the warrior's code of conduct encourages just warfare, discourages excessive violence, and emphasizes self-sacrifice for duty. The warrior class, envisioned in service of duty, follows Dharma to prevent atrocities during war, delineating ethical boundaries for rulers. The synthesis of political and ethical principles, underscored by Dharma, provides a framework for just and righteous governance in ancient India.

Keywords: *Rajdharma, ancient Indian political thinkers, Dharma, legal.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, the role of dharma has been paramount in India. It not only formed the foundation of the country's culture and civilization but also served as the guiding principle for the way of life. The societal responsibilities, cultural consciousness, and philosophical mysticism associated with dharma have been the focal point, attracting scholars and thinkers from various nations to explore the teachings and inquiries into the principles of dharma. The social integration, cultural awareness, and philosophical contemplation rooted in dharma have been central in shaping the ethos of Indian society. Dharma, as a concept, has been instrumental in providing guidance and directing the lives of the ancient Indians. It has played a distinctive role in offering principles for ethical living and governing societal norms. The exploration and understanding of dharma have been at the heart of various legal systems, cultural awareness initiatives, and philosophical inquiries in many countries. Dharma has not only directed the

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ancient Indians but has also been a source of inspiration for numerous scholars and inquisitive minds across different nations.

The profound impact of dharma can be seen in its ability to provide a moral compass for individuals and societies. It has been a source of ethical direction, influencing daily lives and societal conduct. Moreover, the exploration of dharma has been a significant area of interest for philosophers, fostering a sense of intellectual curiosity and creating a framework for organized and principled living. The study of dharma has not only provided ancient Indians with a sense of purpose but has also served as a source of attraction for scholars and thinkers from diverse cultures.

In essence, dharma has been an integral aspect of India's cultural and philosophical landscape. It has been a beacon for guiding individuals and communities, establishing a sense of order and ethical conduct in everyday life. The unique role of dharma in providing direction and regulating the routine existence of the common people has been a distinctive and noteworthy contribution to the ancient Indian way of life. Dr. Radhakrishnan's perspective suggests that dharma cannot be perceived merely as an academic distinction; rather, it is a way of life or an experiential phenomenon. It is considered the essence of existence, a definite point in itself, inherently self-evident and beyond external categorizations. Dharma encompasses a blend of intellectual perspectives, aesthetic beauty, and ethical values. It is evident from available evidence that compared to other countries, India has established a unique position in terms of the philosophical richness, artistic achievements, and the establishment of moral and practical codes related to the mystery and philosophy of dharma.

Throughout various forms of art, literature, and other cultural expressions, the prominence of dharma has endured. The sublime and elevated form of dharma that captivates us is juxtaposed with stories of religious oppression and exploitation carried out in its name, evoking a sense of repulsion. The excellence and grandeur associated with dharma, which captivate us, are counterbalanced by narratives of atrocities and exploitation carried out in the name of religion, leaving us filled with disgust. The development of ancient cultures worldwide indicates that the state institution, in its earliest stages, was sustained and evolved through predominant religious practices. Moreover, as individual actions became more sophisticated, they nurtured and enriched religion, thereby extending its influence. Consequently, an intricate interplay emerged between religion and politics, persisting for an extended period.

In ancient India, even within the frameworks of state systems, the influence of religion was evidently pronounced. This had a discernible impact on contemporary politics, manifesting in

the form of ethical governance. The nature of ancient Indian civilization was inherently spiritual, as highlighted by the profound influence of spirituality on various aspects of life. Sri Aurobindo has referred to spirituality as the key to understanding the Indian mind. According to him, a comprehensive understanding of the organization and political thought of ancient India is only possible within the backdrop of its religious traditions. "Dharma and politics both constitute integral aspects of human civilization and cultural values. Not just in India, but in numerous countries, religious principles have influenced and inspired societal norms and governance ideals. From ancient times, the lives of Indians have been guided by spiritual aspirations and a sense of ethical consciousness. Moreover, in various nations and societies, the broad shadow of religion has consistently played a dynamic role, shaping and sustaining their essence. Consequently, Indian religions have made significant contributions to the development of Indian civilization and culture.

In the development of Indian civilization and culture, Indian religions have played a distinctive role. Indian society and its traditional way of life, including governance structures, social norms, economic activities, artistic expressions, and more, have been profoundly influenced by religious principles. The cultural and social fabric of India, encompassing political ideologies and societal practices, has remained actively intertwined with the influence of religion throughout its historical evolution." Dharma has pervaded every aspect of life here, from birth to death, making its essential contribution through the harmonious integration of individual responsibilities in family and societal structures. In India, from ancient times to the modern era, the successful application of Dharma has been seen as establishing a balance and coordination between worldly and spiritual aspects of life. The practical philosophy of Dharma emphasized the rightful conduct and fulfilment of duties, believed to lead to both material and spiritual well-being. This ensured that individuals not only pursued worldly prosperity but also spiritual elevation.

The pragmatic application and adherence to the principles of Dharma were considered essential in India, promoting the establishment of a well-balanced and harmonious coexistence between the secular and spiritual dimensions of life. This is why Dharma holds paramount significance in the ancient Indian political system, where it played a pivotal role in shaping the ethical foundations of governance. The essence of Dharma lies in upholding and practicing virtuous deeds, signifying the commitment to righteous actions. The true Dharma is realized through the observance of righteous conduct and the fulfilment of one's duties. Dharma encompasses principles of justice, morality, truth, and righteous conduct, forming a collective of virtuous qualities. On the contrary, injustice, immorality, falsehood, and unethical actions are considered

forms of Adharma, opposing the principles of Dharma.

In the Rigvedic Samhita, Dharma is initially defined as the permanent nature, characteristics, or disposition of an entity or an individual. However, over various periods, scholars and ethicists have made efforts to define Dharma in more specific terms, relying on linguistic and contextual interpretations. These interpretations have resulted in the articulation of Dharma in multifaceted dimensions, incorporating various characteristics and contextual nuances." Through Dharma, continuous efforts have been made to instil ethical values in humans, aiming at guiding them towards divine actions. Hence, Dharma places greater emphasis on practical conduct than mere beliefs. It can be regarded as an invaluable means for the progress of both individuals and society. One could say that Dharma acts as an indispensable and influential guide for personal actions from a moral standpoint. Consequently, Dharma serves as a method to delineate the ethical pathways for all human activities. It can also be seen as a mirror that reflects a comprehensive understanding of an individual's collective moral actions, providing clarity on their ethical conduct."

In this manner, Dharma has intricately woven social, political, and personal conduct and ideologies along with the aspects of mundane and spiritual ethics, truth, justice, and righteous behaviour. It suggests that dissecting any one element of Dharma from its comprehensive nature is a challenging task. Nevertheless, political stability and the establishment of an environment of truth and righteous conduct in a state can be considered as the paramount importance of Dharma. Upholding the values of truth and virtuous governance within a state, for the establishment of justice and ethical governance, can be regarded as a significant embodiment of Dharma."

The available evidence makes it clear that religion, particularly Dharma, has been a guiding force in shaping the lives and behaviour of the people in India. Fuelled by this mysterious inspiration, kings and rulers engaged in wars and constructed temples, offering donations and alms to ascetics, saints, and priests. In later periods, to further accentuate this trend, during the era of Sati, women would self-immolate during times of war. As a result, despite occasional shortcomings, there were minimal signs of political anarchy and disorder. Instead, the country displayed a form of national cultural unity through the medium of Dharma. This unity was established not just through religious practices but also through the establishment of a national cultural identity, showcasing the impact of Dharma on the social and political fabric of the nation." In the early stages of cultural development, when the human mind was dominated by natural forces and engulfed in superstitions, religious beliefs held greater influence. This fact is evident in the ancient civilizations of Sumer, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley, where

governance was influenced by the principles of Dharma. In ancient Indian history as well, Dharma and the state are seen to influence each other. Although it can be argued that the influence of Dharma on the state was not universally and consistently paramount, in ancient India, the impact of Dharma on political life was often indirect and mediated through various social institutions. It is evident that the foundation of ancient Indian organization was primarily spiritual, and the development of political institutions occurred through a significant ideological framework within society.

This suggests that the ancient Indian social structure was fundamentally rooted in spirituality, and the evolution of political institutions may have taken place through a crucial ideological lens embedded within the society, rather than being directly imposed by religious doctrines on the state." In the context of examining the influence of religious factors on political structures during the Vedic period in prehistoric India, attention is often drawn to the cultural remnants and archaeological evidence obtained from the Harappan civilization, particularly the Indus Valley. The historical artefacts and material culture derived from this civilization provide insights into its governance system.

Various historians have theorized about the political structure of the Harappan civilization based on the archaeological findings. Some scholars propose a Dharmatantric (religious governance) aspect, suggesting that the political situation was influenced and guided by religious principles. Piggott, for instance, suggests that the governance system in this civilization was administered by priests, maintaining control over the creation and distribution of governance. Kasambi, on the other hand, describes the governance system as being managed by priests, indicating a complete control over the production and distribution of governance.

There is also an argument put forth by scholars like Thapar and Habib, who acknowledge the possibility of a dharmatantric influence on the political structure within the context of the Harappan civilization. Habib specifically highlights the combined influence of deity worship, superstitions, and a priest, suggesting that these factors played a role in maintaining a balanced and interdependent relationship between the ruling and the ruled classes. It is crucial to note that interpretations may vary, and while some historians argue for a dharmatantric influence, others may propose alternative perspectives. The study of ancient civilizations is inherently complex, and interpretations are subject to on going research and scholarly debate.

Beyond the context of the Indus Valley Civilization, scholars have also observed the pervasive influence of religious principles on political structures in contemporary societies like Mesopotamia and Sumer. Many researchers assert that, similar to the absence of prominent

temple remains in the Indus Valley, there is a lack of evidence for large temple structures in Mesopotamia. Instead, the discovery of the massive granary in Mohenjo-Daro suggests an alternative socio-political structure during the Harappan civilization.

In this scenario, doubts arise about the existence of a Dharmatantric influence, as seen in the prevalent priestly control over governance in Mesopotamian city-states. However, it is essential to recognize that the absence of colossal temple ruins does not necessarily discount the possibility of religious influence on the political structures of the Harappan civilization. Various artifacts, such as the terracotta figurines of a mother goddess found in different settlements, depict the religious significance and cultural practices of the society. Additionally, the various seals and the extensive use of symbols found in Harappan artifacts suggest a spiritual dimension to their societal beliefs.

The diverse terracotta female figurines, the depiction of religious symbols on seals, and the elaborate use of rituals and practices in burials all indicate the profound religious underpinnings of the society. Moreover, the artefact's found in graves not only reflect the spiritual beliefs of the Harappan people but also provide insights into their daily life and cultural practices. The depiction of early Vedic and Vedic-age political, religious, and social life is presented in the hymns of Vedic scriptures. Scholars believe that the Rigvedic period spans from the second to the seventh book, making it the oldest portion. These hymns were composed by the priests who prayed to the deities on behalf of themselves or the leaders of their clans.

It is evident from the Rigveda that in the early Vedic period, the predominant form of political organization was tribal. During that time, there was no established settled territory, and leaders were regarded as protectors of the tribe. Although the term "Rajan" (king) is used several times in the Rigveda, it can be argued that the political structure described in the Rigveda was not as evolved as it appears in the later Vedic period or the subsequent eras. While the Rigveda does use the term "Rajan" for leaders, the political structure during the Rigvedic period may not have been as sophisticated as it later became in the later Vedic period or the transitional era.

In several hymns of the Rigveda, the term "gopa" is used to proclaim the initial form of kingship, employing its original meaning as the protector or guardian of cattle. The fundamental sense of the word is depicted as the protector of animals, particularly cows. Due to this generalized role as a protector, the term eventually became synonymous with a ruler or king. It is noteworthy that the term "gopa" is prominently associated with deities like Indra, Varuna, and Soma in their role as imagined rulers among the gods.

This association with deities is especially notable in the case of Agni, where the term "gopa" is

utilized to depict Agni's role, primarily conceived as the priest or mediator among the gods. In the Shatapatha Brahmana, Agni is referred to as both Brahma (the priestly or spiritual aspect) and Kshatra (the kingly or warrior aspect), indicating a multifaceted representation that aligns with the dual roles of a ruler and a protector. In ancient religious texts, the words "Raja" or "Samarat" are often used in various contexts for deities such as Indra, Varuna, Soma, Agni, and others. Both these terms carry the connotations of authority and rulership. Originally, the term "raja" denoted a guide or a leader, signifying someone who directed the actions of the community. Over time, with the expansion of political power, the term gained prestige and became associated with kingship.

It can be inferred that in the development of political power, tribal struggles played a significant role. This suggests that the most pivotal duty of a king was to provide leadership in battles and secure victory for his people. References to invoking deities like Indra and Agni in the Rigveda for success in battles further reinforce the perception that the king was considered divine-sanctioned. Therefore, "Rajpad" is referred to as a deity-approved. As the ancient Indian civilization progressed until the post-Vedic era, there was a gradual development of monarchical governance systems. During this period, the power of the king was initially limited by divine rituals and regulations. Over time, the king emerged as the ultimate authority, becoming the legislator and enforcer of the entire realm. The process of his selection underwent changes, and the hereditary succession became a predominant practice. Through this, the king ascended to power, becoming omnipotent and unchecked.

In order to restrain the growing influence of the king and to prevent him from becoming arbitrary and unrestrained, Dharmashastras (legal and ethical treatises) and Rajashastras (treatises on statecraft) were formulated. According to the rules established by these scholars, the coronation ceremony of kings followed the pattern of Indra's consecration, and the king came to be known as the ruler in the manner of Varuna. In the context of the Shatapatha Brahmana, the king is directly referred to as the visible manifestation of Prajapati, emphasizing his role as the father of his people.

II. CONCLUSION

This way, the governance and the consecration of kings in the ancient Indian context underwent transformations, with the influence of divine rituals giving way to more structured legal and ethical principles.³¹ Thus, the system of using Dharma to regulate the increasing powers of the state and the king was instituted by political theorists. In the above circumstances, from ancient times, governance and administration were perceived to be based on Dharma. The purpose of

governance was to work for the welfare of the people. Unlike the concept of a religious state, it was not a theocratic rule during that time, but rather a rule guided by Dharma. The foundation of the king's power was often rooted in ancient scriptures and philosophical treatises. The king was expected to act in accordance with these principles, and even the king himself was subject to the expectations outlined by these texts. Therefore, the religious scholars emphasized that it was considered a sin for a king to deviate from these principles. This was because it was believed that deities resided within the king. Most religious texts provide clear instructions that the king should govern in a manner that ensures the continuous growth of the well-being and prosperity of the subjects. This was considered his religious duty. The king had to make vows to this effect when ascending to the throne because being a king was considered an auspicious task, and it was only for this auspicious task that he was granted the royal power.

In the future, only a person born in the royal lineage, i.e., a king, was considered fit for this role, and not just any individual. Hence, it was considered a violation of Dharma to oppose or rebel against such a ruler. Keeping in mind this role of the king and the throne, ancient Indian political theorists made it clear that even though a king was considered the embodiment of divinity, he should be seen as a servant. The term "servant" was used to emphasize that the king, despite being granted the form of a lord by God, had to engage in activities to earn his livelihood through the means obtained from the subjects. This way, the ancient Indian political philosophy upheld the principles of kingship, emphasizing that the divine authority bestowed upon a king should not lead to impurity or unchecked authoritarian rule, and that rulership should be carried out with righteousness and responsibility for the welfare of the society.

Dharma prescribed the concept of Rajdharma specifically for the rulers. The duty of engaging in warfare was outlined under the code of conduct for warriors, emphasizing that they should always remain ready for battle. However, becoming excessively violent or deriving pleasure from warfare was considered contrary to Dharma. According to the Dharmashastras, sacrificing oneself for the sake of one's duty (Swadharma) was a primary responsibility for warriors. Therefore, warfare, which was essential for territorial expansion and maintaining order, became a sacred duty for warriors. Rulers were considered duty-bound to protect their subjects, and governing with justice was seen as their religious obligation. The very existence of the warrior class was believed to be in service of this duty. Through Dharma, they were guided to avoid committing atrocities against civilians during times of war, such as plundering temples and places of worship, looting cities, and causing harm to women, cows, and Brahmins. Any form of heinous and unethical actions, such as harming citizens or committing atrocities in enemy territories, was deemed against Dharma.

The examination of the study of ancient Indian political science reveals that the contemporary political theorists made an effort to establish a synthesis of political ideals along with Dharma while formulating political and administrative principles. Hence, the rulers of that time started recognizing politics within the framework of Dharma. Every action of the contemporary rulers was directed by this concept of royal duty. Prominent figures like Manu, Yajnavalkya, Kautilya, and others discussed these concepts extensively in their respective texts on Dharma. Yajnavalkya, through his Dharmashastra Nibandh and Devanbhuttha's Samruti Chandrika, presented explicit guidelines for royal duties, encapsulating the principles and regulations under the term "Dharma. These ancient political theorists, through the medium of Dharma, warned against the misuse of power and resources by rulers, emphasizing the consequences of deviating from righteous conduct. The clarity of their writings suggests that the ancient Indian political theorists sought to restrain rulers from any unwarranted misuse of authority by binding them within the limits of Dharma. Even in the absence of powerful legal constraints, these rulers adhered to ethical and moral principles, which were more potent and effective than prevailing constitutional ideals. In this manner, governance was conducted based on the principles outlined by Dharma and political theorists. The entire system of ruling was guided by the laws and regulations set by these principles, and the rulers, especially monarchs, followed the dictates of Dharma in their administration. Even after achieving victory in wars, rulers and warriors were expected to adhere to ethical and moral principles dictated by Dharma. From the Vedic era to the medieval period, a robust tradition of political responsibilities and ethical boundaries had been established. As a result, those in positions of political power respected the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of the general populace and never overstepped the boundaries.

Contrary to seizing power based on personal whims and fancies, those in authority, throughout various periods, upheld the principles of righteousness and consistently made efforts to walk the path of virtue. Therefore, if we examine this context from the prehistoric age to the medieval period, it becomes evident that governance was fundamentally rooted in Dharma, and the use of political power was primarily seen as a means to uphold righteous principles.

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