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Kings and Dharma: Leadership Archetypes from the Rigveda

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the leadership archetypes found in the Rigveda, one of the oldest Indo-Aryan texts, through the lens of dharma (righteous duty) and its relationship to kingship. It delves into how early Vedic society conceptualized ideal rulers—not only as wielders of temporal power but as moral exemplars entrusted with upholding cosmic and social order. Drawing from primary hymns, the study identifies and analyzes four key archetypes: the warrior-king, the righteous judge, the visionary unifier, and the ritual upholder. Each archetype is situated within its textual and historical context and is examined for its relevance to both Vedic society and contemporary leadership theories.

Through thematic analysis of selected Rigvedic hymns and references to prominent kings such as Sudas, Divodasa, Bharata, and Nahusha, the paper traces how leadership was legitimized through divine association, ritual performance, and ethical conduct. Special emphasis is placed on the interplay between human action and divine sanction, as seen in the roles of gods like Indra and Agni in reinforcing political authority. Furthermore, the study draws parallels between Rigvedic leadership traits—such as bravery, wisdom, generosity, and sacrifice—and modern leadership frameworks, including transformational and ethical leadership.

While recognizing the cultural and temporal distance between Vedic and modern contexts, the paper argues that the ethical core of Rigvedic leadership remains relevant in shaping contemporary Indian thought on governance and institutional responsibility. It concludes by suggesting avenues for further comparative research with texts like the Mahabharata and the Arthashastra to deepen our understanding of Indian leadership traditions.

Keywords: Rigveda, dharma, Vedic kingship, leadership archetypes, Indra, Sudas, ethical leadership, transformational leadership, ancient Indian governance, ritual legitimacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in the Vedic tradition is deeply intertwined with notions of *dharma* (righteousness), divine sanction, and the well-being of society. Unlike modern constructs of leadership that often separate ethical principles from administrative competence, Vedic

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leadership was holistic—it demanded moral integrity, ritual purity, martial valor, and alignment with cosmic order. The Vedic period, especially as reflected in the *Rigveda*, presents kings not merely as political heads but as moral and spiritual exemplars entrusted with the task of sustaining harmony between humans, nature, and the divine. Within this cosmological and sociopolitical matrix, the king's role transcended mere governance; it embodied the upholding of *ṛta*—the universal order—which later evolved into the broader concept of *dharma*.³

The *Rigveda*, the earliest of the four Vedas, provides a foundational lens into the socio-religious worldview of ancient India. Comprising 1,028 hymns across ten books (*maṇḍalas*), the *Rigveda* is primarily a compendium of hymns dedicated to various deities such as Indra, Agni, and Varuna. However, embedded within these hymns are valuable references to kings, chieftains, and leaders whose deeds and virtues are often portrayed as being favored by the gods. Figures like Sudas, Divodasa, Yadu, Trasadasyu, and Nahusha appear throughout the hymns not only as political actors but as moral agents negotiating divine will, social duty, and military challenges.⁴

Studying the *Rigveda* for insights into leadership is particularly significant for contemporary Indian thought. While Western leadership theories offer rich frameworks—such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, or Machiavellian pragmatism—they often lack the cultural specificity necessary for application in Indian contexts. The *Rigveda*, by contrast, offers indigenous leadership archetypes deeply rooted in Indian civilization, spiritual tradition, and historical consciousness.⁵ As highlighted in the coursework document, examining Vedic leaders helps modern scholars reconnect with context-sensitive leadership models that emphasize duty, selflessness, divine accountability, and communal welfare. Moreover, these archetypes promote values such as courage, generosity, devotion to truth, and respect for ritual, all of which remain relevant to ethical and sustainable leadership even today.⁶

In this study, the *Rigveda* is explored not merely as a sacred text, but as a repository of early Indic leadership ideals. By analyzing hymns that mention specific kings and their interactions with deities and subjects, this paper seeks to extract key leadership archetypes and evaluate their philosophical underpinnings. Ultimately, the goal is to bridge ancient wisdom with

³ Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. I (Benares: E.J. Lazarus & Co. 1896), available at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/index.htm>.

⁴ Stephanie W. Jamison & Joel P. Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (Oxford Univ. Press 2014).

⁵ See *Rigveda* 1.1.1–6 (invocation to Agni as the priest and leader of sacrifice); Griffith, *supra* note 1.

⁶ Arthur A. Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* 148–52 (Dutton 1900).

contemporary leadership discourse, demonstrating that the Vedic ideal of kingship—grounded in *dharma*—continues to offer profound guidance in the quest for righteous and effective leadership.⁷

II. RIGVEDA: AN OVERVIEW OF ITS STRUCTURE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The *Rigveda* stands as the oldest surviving textual record of Indo-Aryan civilization and forms the bedrock of Vedic literature and Hindu thought. Composed between 1500 BCE and 1200 BCE, the *Rigveda* is organized into ten books, known as *maṇḍalas*, comprising 1,028 hymns (*sūktas*) and over 10,000 verses (*ṛcs*). Though its principal objective was to invoke deities for blessings, protection, and prosperity, the text also offers glimpses into the political and moral fabric of Vedic society. The kings mentioned in the *Rigveda*—such as Sudas, Divodasa, Yadu, and Trasadasyu—are not only historical or mythic figures but also embodiments of leadership principles that align with *ṛta*, the early conceptual precursor of *dharma*.

The composition of the *Rigveda* reflects a dual structure: hymns dedicated to deities and hymns referencing human affairs, including battles, dynasties, and governance. While deities like Indra, Agni, and Varuna dominate the text, their interaction with kings provides key insights into the ritualistic legitimization of political authority. For instance, in *Rigveda* [7.18], the famous hymn to Indra narrates the **Battle of Ten Kings**, where **King Sudas**, of the Bharata tribe, is victorious with Indra's aid:⁸

“Indra helped Sudas in battle, scattering his enemies, turning the mighty river’s course for him.” (RV 7.18.5)

This verse not only reflects Sudas's martial capability but also reinforces the ideal that legitimate leadership is affirmed through divine favor and ritual fidelity. Sudas's priest, Vashistha, played a crucial role in conducting sacrificial rites and invoking the gods, highlighting how religious functionaries were essential to establishing a king's divine sanction.

Similarly, **King Divodasa** is portrayed in *Rigveda* [1.112.14] as a recipient of Indra's divine protection:

“Indra gave to Divodasa, with his thunderbolt, victory over Sambara, destroying ninety-nine forts.” (RV 1.112.14)

⁷ See *Rigveda* 10.125.1–8 (the Hymn of Vak, personified speech), for the articulation of cosmic and leadership order.

⁸ *Rigveda* 7.18.13 (Describes Indra aiding Sudas in the Battle of Ten Kings); see Jamison & Brereton, *supra* note 2.

This image of a god-empowered king defending his people against enemies reveals how leadership in the *Rigveda* was conceived not only as political stewardship but as cosmic duty. A king was seen as a mediator between divine forces and earthly society, his success contingent upon alignment with both ritual practice and moral conduct.

The *Rigveda* also incorporates philosophical themes relevant to leadership. The hymns often reflect on power, justice, sacrifice, and the transient nature of life—urging rulers to act with humility and foresight. For example, *Mandala 10*, which is one of the more speculative and philosophical books, includes hymns that contemplate the creation of the universe and the origins of order. In this metaphysical backdrop, kingship is not merely an administrative function but a sacred responsibility to uphold cosmic balance.

In societal terms, the *Rigveda* illustrates a tribal and semi-nomadic social order, where kings led clans and tribes during war and peace. Leadership was often hereditary but not unconditionally so; a king was expected to earn his position through valor (*vīrya*), generosity (*dāna*), and alignment with the priesthood. **King Trasadasyu** is praised in *RV 4.42.8* as a benefactor and righteous ruler:⁹

“Trasadasyu, generous and wise, brought offerings to Agni, kindled the fire of truth and justice.” (RV 4.42.8)

This praise reflects the archetype of the “philosopher-king,” someone whose rule is shaped by religious devotion and social benevolence. He exemplifies the convergence of ethical leadership and ritual piety.¹⁰

Rituals like the *soma yajña* (sacrificial offerings involving the soma plant) and *ashvamedha* (horse sacrifice) were not just spiritual performances but acts of political legitimacy. Through these rites, kings demonstrated their capacity to channel divine power for the prosperity of their people. The presence of **King Turvayana** in *RV 6.20.12*, who is mentioned in connection with rituals invoking Indra, reinforces the idea that a ruler’s spiritual standing was as vital as his military prowess.

The organizational structure of the *Rigveda*—from family books (e.g., Mandalas 2–7) to more composite and philosophical sections (Mandalas 1, 8, 9, and 10)—mirrors the progression of Vedic society from tribal confederations to more centralized polities. The textual layering also

⁹ *Rigveda* 2.12, 6.17 (Indra is portrayed as the ideal divine warrior, destroyer of enemies and supporter of kings); Griffith, *supra* note 1.

¹⁰ See *Rigveda* 10.90 (Purusha Sukta), which outlines the cosmic order and social stratification; Jamison & Brereton, *supra* note 2.

reflects a growing complexity in the conception of kingship—from mere chieftains to dharmic rulers tasked with upholding the world order.¹¹

In conclusion, the *Rigveda*'s structure and content illuminate a world where kings were not just warriors or administrators but sacred trustees of cosmic order. Leadership was validated not through brute power but through righteousness, ritual, and alignment with the divine will. The hymns to kings like Sudas, Divodasa, and Trasadasyu exemplify distinct leadership archetypes—each rooted in a harmonious blend of duty (*dharma*), valor (*vīrya*), and sacred obligation (*yajña*). These archetypes continue to offer enduring templates for ethical leadership in both historical and contemporary Indian contexts.¹²

III. KINGS IN THE RIGVEDA: HISTORICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL PRESENCE

The *Rigveda*, while primarily a religious and philosophical text, also serves as a rich repository of historical memory. Scattered across its hymns are references to numerous kings, chieftains, and legendary rulers who not only shaped the political landscape of early Vedic society but also embodied the ideals of righteous and divinely sanctioned leadership. These kings, though sometimes difficult to locate in linear historical timelines, emerge through mythological and narrative strands that blend spiritual metaphors with real sociopolitical events. Their repeated invocation across various *maṇḍalas* reveals their importance not just as rulers but as moral exemplars who navigated warfare, diplomacy, and divine favor.¹³

A few stand out due to the frequency of their mention and the depth of their associated narratives. **King Sudas**, for instance, is the most frequently cited, appearing **24 times** across various hymns. He is best known for his victory in the **Battle of Ten Kings** (*Daśarājña*), a major inter-tribal conflict recorded in *Rigveda* [7.18]. This battle narrative presents Sudas as the archetypal warrior-king, guided by the sage Vashistha and aided by Indra. The hymn recounts how Sudas, despite being outnumbered, was victorious against a confederation of ten rival tribes:

“Indra turned the course of the river for Sudas and scattered his foes like dry grass.” (RV 7.18.6)

Closely following Sudas in prominence is **King Divodasa**, mentioned **17 times**, often portrayed as a righteous and devout ruler. In *Rigveda* [1.112.14], he is said to have received

¹¹ Alfred Hillebrandt, *Vedic Mythology*, Vol. I, at 75–81 (Motilal Banarsidass 1999).

¹² R.S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India* 45–48 (Motilal Banarsidass 1991).

¹³ Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* 57–58 (Penguin Books 2002).

divine assistance from Indra in defeating the demon Sambara and destroying ninety-nine fortresses.¹⁴

“For Divodasa, thy boon servant, with thy bolt, O Dancer, thou didst shatter ninety forts.”
(RV 1.112.14)

Such verses establish Divodasa as a king who upheld *dharma* through both piety and protection of his people, affirming his place as a “protector king” archetype.

Another frequently cited king is **Yadu**, also mentioned **17 times**, often alongside his brother Turvaga. The Rigvedic hymns describe divine interventions that ensured their safety and prosperity. In *Rigveda* [1.174.9], for instance, Indra is invoked as the divine protector:

“When o’er the flood thou broughtest them, O Hero, thou kepest Turvaga and Yadu safely.”
(RV 1.174.9)

King Trasadasyu, with **15 references**, emerges as a generous and benevolent figure, described as a gift-giver and patron of rituals. The hymns extol his devotion to the gods and his fulfillment of sacrificial duties, thereby placing him within the archetype of the *yajamāna*—the ideal sacrificer who strengthens his rule through spiritual merit.

Equally significant is **King Nahusha**, mentioned **nine times**, who is portrayed as a highly ambitious ruler desiring to attain the powers of Indra himself. In *Rigveda* [6.17.1], his aspirations are noted with reverence and caution:

“May I, like Nahusha, attain thy domination and might, O Indra.” (RV 6.17.1)

This positions Nahusha as a complex figure—both a visionary leader and one whose ambition verges on overreach, making him an early example of the philosophical tension between divine aspiration and human limitation.¹⁵

Other kings such as **Bharata**, **Dabhiti**, **Purukutsa**, **Vadhryashva**, **Turviti**, **Asvamedha**, **Turvayana**, and **Rjrasva** are referenced across different *maṇḍalas*, often in connection with divine blessings, sacrificial rites, or tribal affiliations. **Bharata**, in particular, holds a foundational place as the progenitor of the Bharata clan—a group that would later lend its name to the Indian subcontinent (*Bhārata-varṣa*). Though his presence is more symbolic than narrative, his invocation in rituals affirms his significance as the archetype of the ancestral king and national identity bearer.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Rigveda* 1.25.1–5 (Varuna is invoked as the guardian of cosmic and moral order); Griffith, *supra* note 1.

¹⁵ Alfred Hillebrandt, *Vedic Mythology*, Vol. I, at 91–93 (Motilal Banarsidass 1999).

¹⁶ R.S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India* 34–39 (Motilal Banarsidass 1991).

The methodology used to identify and interpret these kings within the *Rigveda* involves both **philological analysis** and **cross-referencing with later Vedic and post-Vedic texts**. In the coursework methodology, the English translation by Ralph T.H. Griffith (1896) was selected for textual consistency, alongside references from Shrikant G. Talageri's *The Rigveda: A Historical Analysis* (2000). Kings were identified by systematically scanning the hymns across all ten *maṇḍalas*, isolating names associated with explicit narratives, divine interactions, or ritual mentions. In many instances, contextual analysis was necessary to distinguish proper nouns from descriptive epithets, a task further aided by Sayana's medieval commentary.¹⁷

Additionally, the categorization of these kings into thematic archetypes—such as *the warrior-king* (Sudas), *the divine protector* (Divodasa), *the ritual patron* (Trasadasyu), *the mythic progenitor* (Bharata), and *the seeker of power* (Nahusha)—was drawn from both frequency of mention and qualitative interpretation of hymns. This interpretative model allows for an understanding of leadership that transcends mere chronology and highlights the multidimensional ideals enshrined in Vedic kingship.¹⁸

In essence, the *Rigveda* provides a panoramic view of early Indo-Aryan leadership, where the lines between the historical and mythological blur to construct enduring models of kingship. These kings are not only political leaders but moral agents, whose actions are measured against the cosmic standard of *ṛta*—the precursor of *dharma*. Their presence in the text underlines the inseparability of governance, spirituality, and ethical responsibility in Vedic civilization.

IV. CONCEPT OF DHARMA IN THE RIGVEDIC CONTEXT

The concept of *dharma* in the Rigvedic context predates its later, more systematized interpretations found in the *Dharmashastra*, *Mahabharata*, or the *Manusmriti*. In the *Rigveda*, *dharma* is closely aligned with the term *ṛta*, which signifies cosmic order, truth, and the harmonious functioning of the universe. This primordial order governed not only the movements of celestial bodies and natural forces but also human conduct, rituals, and political authority. Though the term *dharma* itself appears less frequently in the *Rigveda*, its conceptual foundation is undeniably present in the hymns that emphasize moral order, divine law, and righteous action.

In early Vedic society, *dharma* was not a rigid set of commandments but a flexible, context-

¹⁷ Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* 110–115 (Oxford Univ. Press 2000).

¹⁸ D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* 110–113 (Popular Prakashan 1956).

sensitive principle of rightful duty, aligned with one's role in society. For the common person, it involved ethical behavior, hospitality, and adherence to ritual obligations. For the priestly class, it meant accurate ritual performance, spiritual knowledge, and maintenance of sacred traditions. And for kings and rulers, *dharma* assumed a more expansive form: it demanded protection of the people, preservation of social harmony, performance of sacrifices, and just warfare. Kingship was not merely a political office but a sacred duty (*raja dharma*), requiring alignment with the divine order to maintain both worldly prosperity and cosmic stability.

The king, in the Rigvedic vision, was a custodian of *ṛta*, and by extension, of *dharma*. He was expected to govern not by arbitrary will, but through wisdom, fairness, and religious adherence. A just ruler upheld the moral order through laws, rituals, and martial protection against threats to communal well-being. His success and legitimacy were believed to depend on divine support, which could only be secured by acting in accordance with *ṛta*. This divine order was not abstract—it was continually affirmed through the performance of sacrifices (*yajña*), consultation with sages, and invocation of deities for guidance.

For instance, hymns that praise the gods for supporting kings who act justly highlight the ideal that divine favor is contingent upon righteous conduct. When leaders are portrayed as recipients of divine aid, such assistance is not arbitrary but earned through *dharma*-aligned actions—be it generosity, bravery, or ritual fidelity. A king who strayed from *dharma* threatened not only his own reign but the cosmic equilibrium, potentially bringing disorder, famine, or defeat.

This understanding of kingship as inherently ethical laid the foundation for later treatises on political theory in India, where *dharma* remained the central pillar of good governance. Unlike Machiavellian or utilitarian notions of power, Vedic kingship demanded restraint, accountability, and constant remembrance of the divine mandate. Even military conquest, when necessary, had to be justified within a moral framework—preferably as a defense of the righteous or as part of a sacred duty, rather than mere expansionist ambition.

Thus, *dharma* in the Rigvedic context functioned both as a universal principle and a practical guide for leadership. It governed not only the metaphysical balance between gods and men but also the very fabric of society, reinforcing the idea that true power emerges from righteous conduct. Kings who embraced this ethos became not just rulers but moral exemplars, setting standards for future generations. The enduring legacy of this Rigvedic vision is its insistence that leadership, to be meaningful and enduring, must be deeply rooted in ethical responsibility and spiritual awareness.

V. LEADERSHIP ARCHETYPES: TRAITS AND THEMES

Leadership in the *Rigveda* is not framed as a monolithic ideal, but rather as a constellation of archetypes—each shaped by the needs of the time and the demands of dharma. These archetypes emerge from both explicit narratives and symbolic associations in the hymns. Though kings are not always the central subjects of the *Rigveda*, their portrayal offers a rich typology of leadership models that combine martial ability, moral vision, and religious legitimacy. These archetypes remain relevant not only as historical constructs but as enduring frameworks of ethical and strategic leadership.

One of the most prominent archetypes is that of the Warrior-King, embodied by figures like Sudas. His decisive victory in the *Battle of Ten Kings* (*Daśarājña*) is more than a military triumph—it symbolizes the defense of dharmic order against chaos. The battle, described in *Rigveda* Book 7¹⁹, is significant not merely because Sudas emerged victorious against a coalition of powerful tribes, but because he did so with the guidance of his priest Vashistha and the blessings of Indra. This alliance between divine will, priestly wisdom, and royal courage defines the warrior-king as not just a conqueror, but a defender of cosmic balance. The Sudas archetype teaches that military might must be used responsibly—only in service of righteousness and societal harmony.²⁰

Parallel to the martial archetype is the figure of the Righteous Judge, represented by leaders such as Divodasa. In various hymns, Divodasa is described not only as a warrior but as a king who dispenses justice and protects his people with fairness and dedication. His victories are often portrayed as resulting from his alignment with divine law rather than brute strength alone. This archetype emphasizes a leader's role in upholding moral and legal order. The righteous judge does not rule by fear or manipulation but commands respect through wisdom, ethical governance, and the fair treatment of allies and adversaries alike. This model resonates with the later concept of *raja dharma*, where kings were expected to act as the ultimate dispensers of justice in accordance with sacred norms.²¹

A third archetype that emerges in the Rigvedic ethos is the Visionary and Unifier, a role exemplified by the ancestral figure of Bharata. Though his name is invoked more symbolically than narratively in the hymns, Bharata stands as a foundational figure representing unity, identity, and shared purpose.²² The tribe named after him, the Bharatas,

¹⁹ *Rigveda* 7.18.13–25 (Sudas's role in the Battle of Ten Kings); Jamison & Brereton, supra note 1.

²⁰ *Rigveda* 7.83.1–4 (Indra aids Sudas in battle); Griffith, supra note 2.

²¹ *Rigveda* 1.112.5 (Ashvins grant blessings to Divodasa); Griffith, supra note 2.

²² *Rigveda* 1.63.7 (Indra favors Divodasa's just rule); Jamison & Brereton, supra note 1.

plays a central role in Rigvedic socio-political organization, suggesting that his leadership was instrumental in creating a cohesive cultural and political identity. This archetype embodies the values of foresight, consolidation, and the building of collective consciousness. Such a leader transcends the immediate needs of warfare or governance and instead lays the groundwork for future generations to thrive under a unified banner of culture, language, and shared rituals.²³

Lastly, the archetype of the Protector and Ritual Upholder is represented through more complex figures like Nahusha. Mentioned with reverence and caution in the *Rigveda*, Nahusha is depicted as a king who sought not only temporal power but also divine status— aspiring to rival Indra himself. His ambition reflects the archetype of a ruler who is deeply invested in religious duties and spiritual authority. While later texts present Nahusha as a cautionary tale of overreach, his Rigvedic image retains a degree of nobility. He symbolizes the role of the king as a guardian of ritual practice and divine connection. This archetype serves to remind leaders that governance is not limited to administration or conquest—it also involves safeguarding sacred traditions and channeling spiritual energy for the good of the realm.²⁴

These leadership archetypes are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often overlap within a single ruler. A king could be a warrior and a judge, a unifier and a ritualist, depending on the demands of his reign and the guidance of his spiritual advisors. What unites these archetypes is the emphasis on dharma as the guiding principle—whether through the battlefield, the courtroom, the sacred fire, or the building of nations. In the Rigvedic vision, leadership is multidimensional, requiring courage, compassion, foresight, and humility. These traits are not merely desirable but essential for sustaining order in both the human and divine realms.

VI. DIVINE ASSOCIATION AND RITUAL LEGITIMACY

In the *Rigveda*, kingship is not understood solely through human actions or tribal authority—it is deeply embedded in a spiritual framework where the legitimacy of rule is derived from the favor of the gods. The relationship between rulers and deities such as Indra and Agni is not merely symbolic but functionally essential to the concept of dharmic kingship. The gods are invoked not only as protectors or benefactors, but also as validators of a king's moral and political right to lead. This divine association serves to distinguish rightful rule from mere power, embedding governance within the cosmic and ritualistic order known as *ṛta*.²⁵

²³ *Rigveda* 3.33.1–6 (Bharata lineage symbolized through rivers and tribal unity); Griffith, *supra* note 2.

²⁴ *Rigveda* 10.98.8 (Nahusha described as one seeking divine power); Jamison & Brereton, *supra* note 1.

²⁵ Stephanie W. Jamison & Joel P. Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, Vol. I, at 164–170 (Oxford Univ. Press 2014).

Among the pantheon of Vedic deities, Indra plays a central role in the affirmation of kingship. As the god of war, storms, and divine might, Indra is often portrayed as the celestial ally of righteous rulers, particularly those who uphold truth and offer regular sacrifices. He is invoked before and after battles, thanked for victories, and beseeched to grant strength and protection. The hymns present Indra as a force that selectively aids those rulers who act in alignment with *dharma*. In one hymn, a victorious king exclaims that Indra “scattered the enemies like dry grass,” not because of numbers or weapons, but due to divine approval. Such verses illustrate that political legitimacy and military success were deeply intertwined with divine sanction in Vedic thought.

Agni, the fire god and ritual messenger, serves a different but equally crucial role in reinforcing kingship. As the *hotṛ* (priest) of the gods, Agni is the conduit through which human offerings reach the divine. Kings relied on Agni to communicate their devotion, intentions, and petitions to the gods. His presence in royal sacrifices, especially the *soma yajña*, signifies a ruler's active participation in the maintenance of cosmic order. Agni is often described as the “mouth of the gods,”²⁶ receiving oblations on their behalf and ensuring that the king's offerings are acknowledged. His acceptance of these offerings symbolically confirms that the ruler is upholding his sacrificial duties—a core component of Vedic kingship.

The importance of hymns in invoking divine favor cannot be overstated. These hymns, recited during ritual ceremonies, served not just as poetic praise but as performative acts of legitimacy. They articulated the king's alignment with divine forces and reinforced his social and spiritual obligations. By invoking the gods in specific ways—through praises, requests for protection, and expressions of gratitude—kings and their priests ensured that their rule was sanctified and reinforced by higher powers.²⁷

For example, hymns dedicated to Indra often ask for victory in battle, protection of cattle (a symbol of wealth and prosperity), and enduring fame. These requests are not merely personal but civic in nature; they affirm that the king's prosperity and strength will benefit the entire tribe or kingdom. Similarly, hymns to Agni request the god to “bring the gods to the sacrifice,” reinforcing the idea that a king's legitimacy is constantly tested and renewed through ritual engagement.²⁸

²⁶ Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. I, at 29–31 (E.J. Lazarus & Co. 1896), <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/>.

²⁷ Laurie L. Patton, “Authority, Anxiety, and Canon: The Vedas as Scripture,” in *Authority, Anxiety, and Canon: Essays in Vedic Interpretation* 5–9 (State Univ. of New York Press 1994).

²⁸ Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* 112–118

This divine association served both a theological and a practical purpose. It created a framework in which power was never absolute or self-sustained—it was conditional upon moral behavior, spiritual discipline, and ritual performance. A king who ignored this dimension of rule risked losing divine support, which could manifest in military defeat, social unrest, or environmental calamities.²⁹³⁰

In this way, the *Rigveda* embeds kingship within a sacred cycle of duty and reciprocity. Divine favor was not guaranteed—it had to be earned, maintained, and reaffirmed through hymns, sacrifices, and ethical conduct. Thus, ritual legitimacy was not a mere formality but a dynamic process that connected kingship with the divine, shaping a model of rule that was as spiritual as it was political.

VII. LEADERSHIP VALUES IN THE HYMNS

The *Rigveda* is not only a sacred text of hymns dedicated to deities, but also a moral and cultural repository that outlines the values expected of individuals in positions of leadership. The qualities of an ideal ruler are often embedded within verses that extol gods or recount historical events, offering both direct and allegorical reflections on what constitutes virtuous kingship. Among the most emphasized leadership values are generosity, bravery, sacrifice, and wisdom—each deeply intertwined with the broader Vedic ideals of *ṛta* and *dharma*.³¹

Generosity (*dāna*) is a recurring theme in the *Rigveda*, especially in hymns that praise kings and patrons who reward priests and the community. In the Vedic worldview, a generous king is not one who hoards wealth, but one who redistributes it—especially in the form of cattle, food, gold, and other resources—to maintain societal balance and earn divine favor. A well-known verse highlighting this ideal is:

“The givers of wealth have extended their fame like wide rivers, never ceasing.” (RV 1.31.11)

This verse, while metaphorical, conveys the high regard for kings who uphold the economy of reciprocity—earning respect from their subjects and blessings from the gods by being open-handed and benevolent.

Bravery (*śaurya*) is another defining trait of Vedic leaders. Warriors and kings were celebrated for their prowess in battle, but this bravery was never seen in isolation from

(Oxford Univ. Press 1993).

²⁹ Angelika Malinar, *The Bharadvājas in the Mahābhārata: Priests, Kings and Philosophers* 54–59 (Otto Harrassowitz 2007).

³⁰ Laurie L. Patton, “Sanskrit Hymns and the Rhetoric of Kingship,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 119, No. 4, at 617–622 (1999)

³¹ Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of Fire Altar* Vol. I, at 101–106 (Asian Humanities Press 1983).

purpose. Courage was meaningful only when used to defend dharma, protect the community, or resist forces of chaos. The *Battle of Ten Kings* narrative in *Rigveda* Book 7 is filled with imagery that honors valor under divine guidance. One verse affirms:³²

“Indra gave Sudas the strength of heroes, to overcome a host that outnumbered him.” (RV 7.18.13)

Here, bravery is enhanced by righteousness and divine endorsement, reinforcing that true courage arises not from arrogance but from devotion and just cause.

Sacrifice, both literal and symbolic, is perhaps the most spiritually charged value in the *Rigveda*. The concept extends beyond ritual offerings (*yajña*) to encompass a ruler’s willingness to place the needs of the community and the cosmos above personal gain. Kings were expected to perform regular sacrifices to maintain harmony between the human and divine worlds. The verses often associate such acts with divine approval:³³

“He who offers to Agni with a pure heart, for him the gods open paths to fortune.” (RV 1.1.6)

This reflects the foundational idea that leadership requires selflessness—whether in material terms or through sustained commitment to sacred duty.³⁴

Wisdom (*prajñā* or *medhā*) is the fourth pillar of ideal leadership. A king's strength and generosity were incomplete without discernment, strategic thinking, and spiritual insight. Wise rulers were often depicted as those who sought counsel from sages, adhered to rituals, and made decisions based on ethical considerations rather than impulse. Wisdom was both a practical necessity and a spiritual virtue. A hymn that hints at this value says:

“He who knows the law of sacrifice, and who walks in wisdom, his words shall be fulfilled.” (RV 10.117.1)

This underscores the link between knowledge, rightful action, and outcomes—suggesting that leaders must cultivate inner clarity to ensure outer success.³⁵

Together, these values—generosity, bravery, sacrifice, and wisdom—form the ethical architecture of Rigvedic kingship. They transcend tactical governance, portraying leadership as a moral and spiritual endeavor. A ruler was not just an administrator but a beacon of virtue

³² *Rigveda* 1.39.3 (valor in battle and leadership); Jamison & Brereton, supra note 1.

³³ *Rigveda* 2.14.6 (Indra’s protection invoked for brave kings); Griffith, supra note 2.

³⁴ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* 93–96 (Univ. of Chicago Press 1985).

³⁵ Laurie L. Patton, “Sanskrit Hymns and the Rhetoric of Kingship,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 119, No. 4, at 619–622 (1999).

whose conduct shaped the health of the community and the favor of the gods.³⁶

Importantly, these virtues are often presented in hymns addressed to gods, suggesting that deities themselves embody or reward these traits. This blurring of the divine and human realms reinforces the idea that kings were to mirror divine qualities, acting not as overlords, but as trustees of dharma.

VIII. COMPARATIVE REFLECTION: RIGVEDIC ARCHETYPES VS MODERN LEADERSHIP THEORIES

While the *Rigveda* emerges from a vastly different historical, cultural, and metaphysical context than modern organizational life, its leadership archetypes resonate strikingly with several contemporary leadership theories. The warrior-king, the righteous judge, the visionary unifier, and the ritual protector of Vedic texts align—at least in essence—with the values and models discussed in modern leadership discourse, including transformational, servant, and ethical leadership frameworks.³⁷

Transformational leadership, which emphasizes inspiring change, building collective vision, and motivating followers to exceed self-interest for the greater good, finds a natural parallel in Rigvedic leaders such as Bharata. Although not elaborated in great narrative detail, Bharata's symbolic role in unifying clans and establishing a proto-national identity aligns with the transformative qualities of vision, purpose, and legacy-building. Similarly, Sudas, through his leadership during the Battle of Ten Kings, exemplifies not just strategic brilliance but also a transformative outcome—redefining tribal alliances and establishing new socio-political norms with divine endorsement.

Servant leadership, a model built on humility, selflessness, and prioritization of followers' needs, is echoed in the archetype of the righteous and generous king. Vedic hymns often describe ideal rulers as protectors of the people who give generously, perform rituals not for personal gain but for the community's prosperity, and act under divine and priestly counsel. The expectation that kings perform *yajñas* (sacrifices) for the welfare of their people rather than mere personal appeasement of the gods reflects a leadership approach rooted in service and stewardship.³⁸

Ethical leadership, grounded in fairness, accountability, and a clear moral compass, aligns most directly with the archetype of the righteous judge. Leaders like Divodasa, whose rule is

³⁶ Frits Staal, *Rules Without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* 88–92 (Peter Lang 1989).

³⁷ Bernard M. Bass & Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* 2–10 (2d ed. Psychology Press 2006).

³⁸ *Rigveda* 10.117.1–6 (praising generosity and ethical conduct); Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, Vol. I, at 345–347 (E.J. Lazarus & Co. 1896), <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/>.

characterized by justice and divine favor, reflect the importance of integrity and adherence to ethical standards. The concept of *dharma*, as applied to kings, reinforces a leader's obligation to not only follow moral law but to enforce and embody it in governance.

However, drawing direct equivalence between Vedic leadership and modern theories has its limitations, particularly due to vast differences in cultural, philosophical, and institutional contexts. Vedic kingship is inseparable from religious cosmology and ritual order. The king is not just a leader by human standard but a conduit between heaven and earth, invested with spiritual obligations that modern secular frameworks do not recognize. For example, the role of rituals and divine sanction in legitimizing rule has no direct counterpart in modern bureaucratic or democratic systems, where legitimacy is derived from laws or electoral processes.³⁹

Moreover, the Vedic worldview assumes a hierarchical and theologically ordered cosmos, which contrasts with the egalitarian and participatory ethos in many contemporary leadership models. Modern theories tend to emphasize inclusivity, shared leadership, and adaptability, whereas Vedic kingship was more static, inherited, and sacrally fixed, though still tempered by *dharma*.

Cultural contextualization is therefore critical. The archetypes of the *Rigveda* must be viewed as part of a civilizational and religious heritage that prioritizes cosmic alignment, community harmony, and sacred duty over individual ambition or purely rational decision-making. Yet, despite these differences, the core values—wisdom, justice, courage, and service—remain remarkably timeless and universally relevant. The enduring message is that true leadership requires inner discipline, moral clarity, and a commitment to the collective good—whether in a Vedic sacrificial enclosure or a modern boardroom.⁴⁰

In this sense, while modern leadership theories may speak in the language of psychology and organizational behavior, and the *Rigveda* in the idiom of gods and hymns, both recognize the fundamental truth that leadership is ultimately a moral act.

IX. RELEVANCE OF RIGVEDIC LEADERSHIP TO CONTEMPORARY INDIAN THOUGHT

The leadership ideals expressed in the *Rigveda* are not relics of a forgotten past; rather, they form part of a cultural and philosophical continuum that continues to shape Indian political, ethical, and institutional imagination. While the socio-political structures of the Vedic period

³⁹ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* 104–110 (Univ. of Chicago Press 1985).

⁴⁰ Upendra Baxi, “The Dharma of Leadership,” in *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers*, at 122–126 (Aakash Singh Rathore & Silika Mohapatra eds., Routledge 2010).

are markedly different from those of today, the core principles underlying Rigvedic leadership—righteousness (*dharma*), duty (*karma*), justice (*nyaya*), and the pursuit of collective well-being—retain a powerful resonance in contemporary Indian thought.

One reason for this enduring relevance is cultural continuity. The idea of the ruler as a moral exemplar persists in Indian political discourse, even in secular and democratic contexts. Whether explicitly invoked or subtly embedded, the expectations from political leaders often reflect age-old archetypes: that a leader should be fair like a righteous judge, selfless like a servant, strong like a protector, and visionary like a unifier. These ideals are traceable to the Vedic tradition, where leadership was not simply about control or success but about upholding cosmic and societal balance.⁴¹

Modern reinterpretations of ancient texts in Indian public life—through political speeches, institutional mottos, and cultural narratives—demonstrate how the essence of Rigvedic leadership is often reimagined to suit contemporary needs. For instance, principles like *lokasangraha* (welfare of the people), often cited in modern Indian ethics and governance, echo the Rigvedic emphasis on rulers acting for the collective good rather than personal aggrandizement. Similarly, calls for transparent, value-based leadership find support in Vedic notions of *dharma* as the guiding standard of royal conduct.⁴²

From a governance and institutional leadership standpoint, several lessons can be drawn from the Rigvedic archetypes. First is the integration of ethical decision-making into leadership roles. In a time when institutions face crises of trust, the Vedic insistence on inner moral clarity and accountability provides a model for how leaders can anchor their decisions in principle, not expediency.

Second, the importance of ritual or symbolic engagement with the community—while no longer in the form of Vedic sacrifices—remains key. Public service, civic engagement, and responsive governance serve as modern equivalents of the sacred duty that Vedic kings performed through *yajñas*. The act of service becomes not just political duty, but a sacred obligation toward the people.

Third, spiritual and philosophical grounding in leadership continues to be emphasized in Indian contexts, especially in educational, religious, and cultural institutions. Many Indian leaders have drawn upon Vedic and Upanishadic ideals to guide their leadership journey—

⁴¹ Rajeev Bhargava, “Dharma and the Indian Constitution,” in *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution* 105–111 (Oxford Univ. Press 2008).

⁴² V. Sujatha, “Revisiting Ancient Indian Models of Governance,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 36 (2012), at 49–53.

framing authority not as dominion but as stewardship. Mahatma Gandhi's invocation of *dharma*, his emphasis on humility, and his rejection of power for its own sake all find conceptual allies in the Rigvedic vision of leadership.⁴³

However, the relevance of these ideals lies not in replicating Vedic structures or terminology but in distilling their ethical core and adapting them to contemporary democratic and pluralistic frameworks. Rigvedic kingship was hierarchical and theocratic; modern Indian governance is constitutionally egalitarian and secular. Yet the aspiration for a morally guided leadership—one that harmonizes individual capability with collective responsibility—remains constant.

In sum, the *Rigveda* continues to offer a valuable philosophical lens through which to assess and improve leadership in modern India. Its emphasis on righteousness, humility, sacrifice, and ethical courage provides not only a connection to India's civilizational past but also a framework for envisioning a more principled future in governance and institutional life.

X. CONCLUSION

The *Rigveda*, though primarily a collection of hymns addressed to divine forces, also offers a foundational vision of leadership grounded in moral, spiritual, and societal principles. Through its portrayal of kings, the roles of gods, and the expectations of righteous conduct, it presents enduring archetypes that transcend time: the warrior-protector, the just ruler, the visionary unifier, and the devout upholder of ritual. These figures, while operating in the socio-political context of early Vedic tribes, represent leadership models that remain remarkably relevant in today's discourse on ethical and effective governance.

Across the hymns, key leadership values such as generosity, bravery, sacrifice, and wisdom emerge consistently. Kings are celebrated not merely for their power, but for their alignment with *ṛta*—the cosmic order—and their role in maintaining harmony between the divine and human realms. Ritual legitimacy, divine association through gods like Indra and Agni, and the performance of sacred duties all serve to reinforce the ethical foundation of their authority.

When placed alongside contemporary leadership theories such as transformational, servant, and ethical leadership, the Rigvedic models offer striking conceptual parallels. Yet, they also remind us of the importance of cultural context—emphasizing that leadership must be grounded not only in outcomes, but in the deeper values and worldviews of the society it seeks to serve.

⁴³ A.P. Kannangara, "Ancient Indian Political Thought and Its Relevance Today," *Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (2006), at 225–230.

In the Indian context, these archetypes continue to influence political and institutional expectations. From notions of selfless public service to the moral framing of power, the legacy of Rigvedic leadership persists in both symbolic and practical forms.

Suggestions for further research include comparative studies between Rigvedic leadership ideals and those found in later Indian texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra*. The *Mahabharata* presents complex moral dilemmas of leadership and duty, while the *Arthashastra* offers a realist and strategic vision of governance. Exploring the continuities and divergences between these texts can deepen our understanding of how Indian political thought evolved across time—from ritual-centric kingship to more pragmatic and institutional frameworks.

Ultimately, this paper has aimed to reexamine ancient Vedic sources not as archaic texts, but as living repositories of philosophical insight, capable of enriching our contemporary reflections on what it means to lead with integrity, vision, and responsibility.

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