

## RAJADHARMA AND WESTERN THEORIES OF GOVERNANCE

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**Abstract:**

The principles of governance prevalent in India—from ancient scriptures to modern political science—universally attempt to establish a framework for order, justice, and the welfare of the people. The foresight and sense of justice of a king have been recognized as the mind of the human body. Just as the human mind constantly works for the needs and welfare of the whole body, similarly, the king continuously strives for the progress of his subjects.

In the Indian tradition, this framework is embodied in the concept of *Rajdharma* (the duty of the king), which serves as a profound moral and functional blueprint for kingship and the art of governance. It is primarily found in the *Dharmashastras* (such as the *Manusmriti*), Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (which includes the *Saptanga Theory* of the State), and the epic *Mahabharata*.

Parallel to this, the Western intellectual tradition—from Classical Greek philosophy to the Enlightenment—developed a comparable stream of thought, including the idea of the *Social Contract*. According to this theory, the state is not the result of any divine command but rather a voluntary agreement (contract) among individuals. People agree to surrender some of their freedoms to a ruler in order to escape a chaotic natural state and secure the protection of their rights.

*Sovereignty* is the power of the state by which it possesses the authority to make laws, enforce them, and administer justice within its territory, remaining free from external control. Concepts such as *Liberal Democracy* are also part of this tradition. In a liberal democracy, the power of the government is limited by a constitution, which ensures that even the majority cannot violate the rights of minorities. The *Separation of Powers*—among the legislature, executive, and judiciary—further prevents tyranny.

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The purpose of this research paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of *Rajdharm* and the major Western theories of governance. By exploring their fundamental principles, the conception of the ruler's role, their relationship with law, and their ultimate goals, this study seeks to identify areas of similarity and difference. While *Rajdharm* (the king's duty) is rooted in the cosmic and moral order (*Dharma*), Western theories often emphasize rational consensus and secular authority. Understanding these differences provides valuable insight into the diverse historical perspectives on state power and accountability.

**Keywords:** Rajdharm, Dharma, Ancient Indian Political Thought, Governance, Moral Leadership, Ethical Responsibility, Cosmic Order. Western Political Philosophy, Social Contract Theory. Liberal Democracy, Rule of Law, Separation of Powers, Justice and Public Welfare.

### The Essence of Dharma and Raja

The concept of *Rajdharm* (the duty of the king) is not limited merely to political power; rather, it rests on a profound moral and cosmic foundation, as the literal meaning of the term itself is "the Dharma of the king." Here, *Dharma* is the central element—it simultaneously signifies righteousness, moral duty of the individual, the cosmic order that sustains the entire creation, and the fundamental law of the universe. The king (*Raja*) is appointed to uphold this universal *Dharma* on earth; he acts as its protector and preserver.

Thus, the legitimacy of a king's power or authority does not arise from his lineage or military might, but from his ability, steadfastness, and unwavering commitment to uphold *Dharma*. If a king neglects *Dharma*, he loses his legitimacy.

### The Mahabharata (Shanti Parva):

This epic provides the most comprehensive exposition of *Rajdharm*. According to it, the king is essentially the servant of his people, whose duty is to protect and nurture them. Most importantly, the

text emphasizes that a king who fails in his duties becomes subject to both divine and popular condemnation.

### **Kautilya's Arthashastra:**

Considered a pragmatic treatise, the *Arthashastra* places the king within the broader framework of *Rajdharma*. Its primary aim is the security and prosperity (*Artha*) of the state, which must ultimately serve the higher goal of *Dharma*. Kautilya's ideal king is one who prioritizes the happiness of his people:

“In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness, and in their welfare lies his welfare.”

The duties of the king include administering impartial justice (*Danda*), punishing the wicked, protecting the innocent, ensuring economic prosperity (*Varta*), and leading a virtuous personal life—serving as a moral example for his subjects.

### **The Sanction and Limits of *Danda* (Punishment)**

According to Indian *Rajdharma*, *Danda* (coercion or punishment) is an essential instrument vested in the king, whose primary function is to enforce *Dharma* (moral and social order) and protect society from the chaos of *Matsya Nyaya* (the “Law of the Fish,” where the big fish devours the small one). The scriptures do not view *Danda* merely as the personal will of the king; rather, it is regarded as a manifestation of divine order or the will of God itself. The king is merely an instrument who wields this power solely to uphold justice and maintain order.

This belief gives the king's authority a moral foundation, making his commands worthy of obedience. Thus, the purpose of *Danda* is not to instill fear in society but to regulate fear, establish *Dharma*, and create a conducive environment for the pursuit of the four *Purusharthas* (goals of human life): *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (prosperity), *Kama* (desire), and *Moksha* (liberation).

However, this power of *Danda* is neither absolute nor unlimited. As emphasized in the ancient texts—especially in the *Manusmriti* and the *Mahabharata*—the unwise or unjust use of *Danda* proves

disastrous both for the king and for the state. It is believed that if a king abuses this power out of personal desire, anger, or greed, he becomes subject to divine punishment. Such misuse not only destroys his spiritual merit (*Punya* or religious virtue) but also leads to the downfall of his kingdom and himself.

This principle establishes a moral boundary for the king, obliging him to maintain self-control and to exercise *Danda* with utmost caution, wisdom, and justice. In this way, the concept of *Danda* not only empowers the king but also binds him with the highest moral accountability.

In Western political thought, the sanction of *Danda* (use of force or punishment) primarily derives from the **Social Contract Theory**, where the state receives this power through the **rational consent** of the people. According to **Thomas Hobbes**, to escape the chaos of the natural state, people surrender all their rights to an absolute sovereign (the *Leviathan*), thereby granting the sovereign unlimited power to use *Danda* in order to ensure peace and security. However, even this power is limited by its purpose: the protection of citizens.

In contrast, **John Locke** placed clear limits on the power of punishment. In Locke's theory, the state is created to protect the **natural rights** of individuals—life, liberty, and property—and thus, the power to punish is legitimate only when it is confined to enforcing laws and preventing violations of individual rights. Therefore, the acceptance of *Danda* functions as a necessary instrument for safeguarding the security and rights of the people.

The **limits of Danda** form a fundamental principle of modern Western systems of governance, ensured by the **Rule of Law** and **liberal democratic principles**. The doctrine of **Separation of Powers** ensures that the executive authority, which exercises the power of punishment, remains under the control of the judiciary and the legislature.

The main limits of *Danda* are as follows:

It must be **constitutional**, meaning that the state can punish any citizen only in accordance with the Constitution and the positive laws enacted by the legislature.

It must be **proportional**, i.e., the punishment should correspond to the gravity of the offense.

It must follow the principles of **procedural fairness**, which include **due process**, a **fair trial**, and the **right to appeal**.

In summary, in Western thought, the power of *Danda* is granted to the state as an instrument of governance, but this instrument can operate only within the strict boundaries of rational law and the protection of individual liberty.

### Major Western Theories of Governance:

Western political thought presents a diverse range of theories concerning the origin, purpose, and structure of the state.

**Classical Greek Philosophy**, founded by thinkers like **Plato** and **Aristotle**, regarded governance as essentially a moral enterprise. Plato, in his conception of the ideal state, assigned the highest position to the **Philosopher King**, who would rule based on the principles of knowledge and justice. His disciple **Aristotle** called politics the “**master science**,” because its ultimate goal was to achieve the good life or **human flourishing (Eudaimonia)** for citizens. Both thinkers believed that the purpose of the state was not merely to maintain order, but to ensure the full development of human potential.

In this context, Aristotle specifically argued that the best form of governance is one that operates under the **rule of law**, rather than being subject to the arbitrary will of any individual ruler, and functions within a **constitutional framework** to ensure the welfare of citizens.

The **Social Contract Theory** represents a decisive school of Western political thought. It proposes that the legitimacy of the state does not arise from divine right or tradition, but from the **rational consent of the governed**. According to this theory, individuals voluntarily enter into an agreement to create an organized state (*Rajya*) in order to escape the chaos of the “state of nature.”

**Thomas Hobbes**, in his work *Leviathan*, viewed this agreement as one in which individuals surrender almost unlimited power to an **absolute sovereign**, in exchange for complete security. In contrast, **John Locke**, in *Two Treatises of Government*, argued that the purpose of government is to remain committed to the protection of individuals' **inalienable natural rights**—life, liberty, and property. If the government neglects these rights, the people possess the **right to revolution**.

Meanwhile, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, in *The Social Contract*, declared the **General Will** to be the true source of sovereignty. According to Rousseau, genuine freedom lies only in obeying those laws that citizens collectively prescribe for themselves.

### Modern Systems of Governance:

Modern systems of governance are primarily based on the principles of **Liberalism**, which upholds the supremacy of individual rights and freedom of citizens. Liberalism supports a **limited government**, meaning that the power of the state is controlled and restricted by a **constitution**. It also emphasizes the **Rule of Law** and the **Separation of Powers**, as proposed by **Montesquieu**, to prevent tyranny. Within this liberal framework, democratic principles firmly establish the legitimacy of government in **popular sovereignty**—that is, the ultimate source of power lies with the people. Under this system, governments are chosen through **periodic elections** and are held **accountable** to the people through mechanisms such as **parliamentary oversight** and the **judiciary**.

### Justice in Rajdharm

In *Rajdharm*, **justice (Nyaya)** is understood as the preservation of **social and cosmic balance (Dharma)**. The ultimate goal of the state is **Lok-Sangraha**—the welfare of the world—and to ensure the realization of the four legitimate aims of human life (*Purusharthas*): **Dharma (righteousness)**, **Artha (prosperity)**, **Kama (desire)**, and **Moksha (liberation)**.

### Justice in Western Liberalism

In Western Liberalism, the concept of **justice** is primarily **procedural** and **individual-rights-centered**. It focuses not on outcomes, but on **how decisions are made** and **how rules are applied**. Three pillars define this justice:

### **Fairness**

**Equality before the law**—meaning all citizens, regardless of their social status, are subject to the same legal procedures and standards

**Protection of individual rights**, such as life, liberty, and property.

Liberal philosophy holds that if procedures are fair and equal and rights are protected, then the resulting distribution (outcome) is just.

Within this philosophy, the role of the state is interpreted in two distinct ways:

The **Minimal State** or **Night-Watchman State**, which limits government functions to defense, enforcement of contracts, and protection of citizens from harm.

The **Welfare State**, where the state assumes a broader role in ensuring social and economic well-being.

In the concept of the **Welfare State**, justice goes beyond procedural fairness to become **distributive justice**, meaning that the state actively redistributes resources, income, and opportunities in society to ensure **equality of opportunity** for all citizens. In this wider role, the state invests in essential services such as poverty alleviation, healthcare, and education, so that even the underprivileged can have an equal chance for development.

Thus, **Western Liberalism** views justice in two ways:

As a **shield for individual freedom** (Minimal State), and

As an **instrument for social reform and equality** (Welfare State).

In both perspectives, the ultimate goal remains the creation of a rational and orderly society centered on the individual.

### **Functional Separation of Power in Rajdharma**

Under *Rajdharmā*, governance naturally and morally embodied a form of **functional and ethical separation of power**. The **Kshatriya** (the king or political authority) was entrusted with administration, protection, and the power of punishment (*Danda*), while the **Brahmin** (the priestly and scholarly class) held authority over moral order (*Dharma*) and served as advisors and counselors.

The king was morally bound to consult his **Council of Ministers** on administrative matters and, in particular, his **Chief Priest** on issues of religious and moral legitimacy. This system ensured that **moral wisdom (Dharma)** always guided **political power (Bala)**. This moral-ethical separation prevented personal tyranny, as the king was accountable to a higher moral code and to a community of learned advisors.

### Separation of Powers in Modern Western Theory

In contrast, modern Western theories conceive the **Separation of Powers** as a **formal, constitutional, and legal mechanism** designed to divide the powers of government into three distinct branches: **Legislative, Executive, and Judicial**. This principle, popularized by **Montesquieu**, was primarily intended to prevent **tyranny**.

Its central idea is to establish a system of **checks and balances**, whereby each branch exercises control and restraint over the others to prevent the concentration of power in any single institution. Thus, while the separation in *Rajdharmā* was based on **moral and functional distribution** (a distinction between authority and ethics), the **Western model** is founded on **structural and procedural law**, focusing primarily on defining and limiting **institutional power**.

### Conclusion:

The comparative study of *Rajdharmā* and Western theories reveals a fundamental difference in their points of origin. The foundation of *Rajdharmā* lies in a moral imperative, which obliges the king to uphold a pre-established cosmic order (*Dharma*). Here, the source of authority and its accountability are directed toward a higher moral and spiritual code. In contrast, post-Enlightenment Western theories begin with a rational imperative, where the formation of the state is based on individual rights and the

rational consent of the governed (*Social Contract*). In this model, sovereignty ultimately resides in the people, and legitimacy is ensured only through procedural law and constitutional limitations.

This distinction is clear: *Rajdharma* is duty-centered, viewing the ruler as a protector and servant, whereas Western liberalism is rights-centered, prioritizing individual freedom. However, both traditions lead toward a common goal—the welfare of the people and the assurance of justice. *Rajdharma* teaches us to emphasize moral leadership and the internal restraint of power, while the Western model provides a strong legal framework for institutional accountability and procedural justice. For contemporary governance, there is immense potential in integrating the moral and duty-based philosophy of *Rajdharma* with the constitutional and procedural framework of the West, so as to develop a model of governance that is not only efficient and rational but also fundamentally moral and just.

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