

## From Dharma to Dandaneeti: The Science of Statecraft in the Mahabharata

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### Abstract

The Mahabharata, which is frequently praised as India's epic of morality, philosophy, and human experience, serves as a foundational work on statecraft, diplomacy, and governance in addition to its literary and religious value. The complex relationship between Dandaneeti, the science of administration, justice, and enforcement, and Dharma, or moral obligation and righteousness, is at the heart of its political discourse. Those tall-talkers and pseudo-intellectuals who make broad and disagreeable claims that Indian political theory hasn't been developed yet, not even in its most basic form, can be effectively refuted by the Epic alone. It is clear that these audacious critics truly disregarded the Indian texts, such as the Arthashastra and the Mahabharata which had sophisticated political theories and formulations. Our intellectual culture became the outskirts of the western centre as a result of this self-forgetfulness, which left the next generations in a pitiful state of insolvency. It's time for us to stop obsessing over Plato and Aristotle, who may be considered political philosophers but are by no means the founders of political science. We can trace the origins of political thought back to our own land.

A research student of ancient political thought today can confidently assert that it is the Mahabharata which forms the massive basement on which stands the magnificent edifice of ancient Indian religion and thought, culture, literature, politics and economics. Effective leadership necessitates a careful balancing act between moral principles and practical tactics, as the epic illustrates through Yudhishtira's predicaments, Vidura's advice, and Krishna's diplomatic skills.

They said, "दण्डः सर्वभूताश्रितः; यतः रक्षते जनः;" All beings are sustained by punishment; society is safeguarded by it (Dandah Sarvabhutashritah; Yatah Rakshate Janah) (Shanti Parva 54.12). This study shows how the Mahabharata balances moral obligation, justice, diplomacy, war ethics, and leadership by looking at important scenes, moral conundrums, strategic choices, and conversations. It also provides a model for dharma-guided statecraft.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Dharma, Dandaneeti, Ancient Indian religion, Arthashastra, Statecraft.

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## Introduction

In Indian traditions, the term "dharma" encapsulates the concept of morality in all of its manifestations.

"Dharma is a code of conduct supported by the general conscience of the people," according to S. Radhakrishnan. It is neither external in the sense that the law enforces it nor subjective in the sense that it is imposed by the individual's conscience. Men are trained for morality by dharma rather than being coerced into it. It is a living spirit that adapts to the changing needs of society rather than a set of inflexible rules. The Mahabharata is a reflection of the intricate moral and political fabric of human existence, not just an epic about battle and family. At its core is the conflict between Dandaneti, the values that guide social and political life via administration, punishment, and justice, and Dharma, the moral order. The idea of dharma, or ethics and values in statecraft, is making a comeback today. Undoubtedly, if dharma from old Indian civilizational traditions were reformulated for a new international order, of which India is an essential component, it may be more appealing and convincing. Throughout the epic's extensive plot, kings, soldiers, and sages debate issues that are still crucial to political philosophy: What constitutes right rule? How should authority be used? Is it ever moral to use violence? The Mahabharata is considered an early work of what contemporary scholars could refer to as political ethics since it responds to these questions through its moral dialectic.

The statement:-

"सर्वे धर्माः समुत्थाय नृपं यान्ति परायणम्।" (Sarve Dharmah Samutthaya Nrpam Yanti Parayanam) The king is ultimately the source of all forms of dharma. (Santi Parva 58.10)

This emphasizes the main idea of the epic, which is that the monarch is Dharma's protector. Even righteousness falters in the absence of just rule. First of all, dharma is given the weight it deserves in Indian epics like the Mahabharata. Episodes and images throughout the epic demonstrate how individuals prioritize and balance dharma, artha, and kama. The epic makes it abundantly evident at the end that dharma is paramount.

## Dharma: The Ethical Basis of Government

According to the Mahabharata, dharma is a flexible, situation-specific principle that directs moral and political behaviour rather than a strict code. It represents justice, honesty, compassion, and the well-being of the populace; it goes beyond simple religious obligation.

Yudhishtira, also known as Dharmaraja, is the embodiment of the ethical aspect of monarchy. His problems, however, demonstrate that Dharma is situational rather than absolute. Before the battle of Kurukshetra, when he is caught between duty and kinship, Krishna reminds him of the greater cosmic order that needs to be upheld.

For example, "श्रेयान् स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात् स्वनुठितात्।" (Sreyan Svadharmo Vigunah Paradharmat Svanusthitat)

One's own unfinished job is preferable than another's well-executed duty. (Gita Bhagavad 3.35). Krishna defines dharma in this context as having to do with one's function and responsibilities. The king's duty (Raja Dharma) is distinct from the individual's personal ethics, for it involves the collective good. In the Santi Parva, Bhishma advises Yudhishtira that the king must uphold Dharma by enforcing fair laws and administering appropriate punishment.

"राजा धर्मस्य कारणं, धर्मो राज्ञः कारणं स्मृतम्।" The monarch is the source of Dharma, and Dharma upholds the king (Raja Dharmasya karanam, dharmo rajnah karanam smrtam) (Santi Parva 59.31) As a result, Dharma and Rajadharma (the king's duty) are mutually reinforcing; ethics upholds power, and power upholds ethics.

### **Dandaneeti: The Study of Punishment and Order in Politics**

The practical side of government is symbolized by Dandaneeti, which translates to "policy of the rod." In order to keep society in order, it recognizes that authority, discipline, and enforcement are necessary. According to Vidura's Vidura Niti, monarchy is useless without Danda, and tyranny is what Danda is without Dharma.

The statement goes, "दण्डः सर्वभूतानां पालकः; दण्डः रक्षति रक्षितः।" (Daṇḍaḥ Rakṣati Rakṣitaḥ, Daṇḍaḥ Sarvabhutanam Palakaḥ.) When upheld, Danda upholds the planet and protects all beings. (Santi Parva 54.12). According to Bhishma, Danda needs to be directed by discernment and self-control. Absence of punishment encourages disorder; excessive punishment breeds revolt. The balance between leniency and authoritarianism, which contemporary political theorists regard as the cornerstone of the rule of law, is hence where Dandaneeti lies.

Vidura cautions against leaders who are motivated more by selfish interests than by moral obligation:

"नाजा स्वार्थतन्त्रः स्यात्, न दण्डो धर्मवरिज्ञः।" The king should not act selfishly or separate punishment from dharma (Na Raja Svarthatantraḥ Syat, Na Daṇḍo Dharmavarjitaḥ).

(Niti Vidura 1.20). As a result, Dandaneeti science is a supplement to Dharma, where policy determines technique and ethics defines goal. This ethical-political synthesis foreshadows contemporary ideas of the rule of law, in which justice, rather than coercion, is used to legitimize government. Understanding the ancient Indian conception of justice, power, and moral responsibility—principles that are still very applicable to modern political philosophy and public administration—is thus made possible by studying Dandaneeti.

### **Political strategy and diplomacy**

The Mahabharata also demonstrates a highly developed grasp of alliance-building, negotiation, and diplomacy. Krishna's pre-war peace mission to Hastinapura is a prime example of ethically sound and strategically sound diplomacy.

"शान्ति धर्मे स्थितःश्रेष्ठः; न च हिंसा प्रमसस्यते। (Śānti dharme sthitaḥ śreṣṭhaḥ, na ca himsā praśasyate)  
One should never seek violence; peace is the highest virtue. (Parva Udyoga 32.5)

The core of the Mahabharata's diplomacy is encapsulated in this verse: peace and dialogue must always come before battle. However, power directed by Dharma turns into a duty rather than a desire when peace is no longer achievable. There is no better example of moral diplomacy than Krishna's peace mission prior to the Kurukshetra battle. He used the four traditional diplomatic techniques—Sama (conciliation), Dana (concession), Bheda (division), and Danda (force)—that Kautilya subsequently developed. His request for only five villages from Duryodhana exemplifies the finest level of moral moderation and compassionate statecraft.

"I appear to restore order whenever righteousness deteriorates and injustice increases." (Gītā Bhagavad 4.7) Krishna's mission teaches that ethical realism—moral in intent but adaptable in methods—must be the foundation of diplomacy. According to the Mahabharata, monarchs must act with foresight rather than passion because alliances and enmities are temporary.

The statement reads, "न चिरं मित्रं न च शत्रुःस्थायी, कालःसर्वं परिवर्तयति।"

Time alters all relationships, thus neither friendliness nor hostility is everlasting. (Parva Udyoga 34.20). Therefore, the epic portrays diplomacy as a sacred obligation – the upholding of Dharma via prudent policy and patient discourse. Its timeless message is unmistakable: a just ruler must prioritize peace, but never at the expense of the truth.

### Leadership and Guidance: Political Thoughts of Vidura and Bhishma

Vidura and Bhishma are portrayed in the Mahabharata as the epitome of moral guidance. The practical wisdom of Vidura, or Vidura Niti, provides a guide to moral leadership that prioritizes honesty, caution, and fairness.

#### Vidura: Political Realism's Conscientious Voice

As Dhritarashtra and Pandu's half-brother, Vidura is presented as the Kuru dynasty's moral compass. His political philosophy, commonly referred to as Vidura Niti, can be interpreted as a manual for moral leadership, responsible administration, and ethical governance. In the epic, he plays the part of an advisor—a mantrin whose authority is derived from moral wisdom rather than royal might. As the cornerstones of statecraft, Vidura continuously promotes the importance of justice (nyaya), truth (satya), and restraint (samyama). He stresses that cooperation and intelligence, not force, are what sustain governance and cautions against the perils of self-centered leadership and the abuse of power. "न राजा एव कृत्वा, न मन्त्री एव कृत्वा।" is the verse. Vidura's political realism is demonstrated in (Na Raja Eva Krtva, Na Mantri Eva Krta)—“The success of governance is not achieved by the king or the minister alone, but by their cooperation” (Shanti Parva 48.15). In his view, power is not autocratic but rather collaborative and consultative. The ideal king must listen to different viewpoints, surround himself with knowledgeable, trustworthy advisors, and base his judgments on dharma rather than selfish interests. It is possible to see Vidura's idea of leadership as an early

example of what contemporary theorists could refer to as ethical bureaucratic governance. According to him, the moral tone of a kingdom is shaped by the moral behaviour of its rulers; when a king is just, his subjects imitate his virtue, and when he is corrupt, chaos erupts throughout the political system. Thus, morality is positioned by Vidura as a functional requirement for political stability rather than as an abstract virtue. He constantly cautions Dhritarashtra that kings and their kingdoms are destroyed by attachment, favouritism, and greed. A vision of kingship based on service rather than dominance, his teachings promote self-control, patience in making decisions, and empathy for subjects.

#### Bhishma: The King of Philosophy and the Morality of Government

Bhishma is the philosopher-statesman who turns experience and pain into wisdom, whereas Vidura is the court's pragmatic conscience. His talks to Yudhishtira following the Kurukshetra war, especially in the Shanti Parva and Anushasana Parva, reframe the battlefield as a place for moral instruction. His thoughts on duty, justice, and kingship are among the first organized expressions of political ethics in Indian philosophy.

Bhishma presents a three-part theory of dharma:

Rajadharma: the ruler's obligations, which include upholding the law, justice, and general welfare;

Samajadharma: the moral underpinnings of social harmony and order;

Individuals' personal moral obligations, especially those of rulers, are known as svadharma.

Bhishma maintains that the ruler's job is to balance these three aspects so that the use of political power serves not just practical purposes but also ethical and spiritual ones. He cautions that extreme moral idealism without practical enforcement fosters anarchy, whereas governance devoid of dharma invariably results in tyranny. Thus, Bhishma's ideas foreshadow later political theories that strike a balance between ethics and power by exhibiting a nuanced synthesis between moral idealism and political realism.

The concept of moral stewardship is furthered by Bhishma's conversations with Yudhishtira, which imply that leadership is a holy trust (rajya-dharma) bestowed by the people and the cosmic order. Self-interested leaders betray this confidence and set themselves up for failure. In contemporary words, the idea of ethical leadership—a leader driven by responsibility, compassion, and an unyielding sense of duty toward the common good—is closely aligned with Bhishma's ideology. Through their discussions, the Mahabharata turns political authority into a moral endeavour, with the ruler's job being not just to dominate but also to advise and protect. The text foreshadows the contemporary idea of the rule of law based on moral governance in this synthesis of virtue and power—a legacy that is still relevant in modern political philosophy and public administration.

#### War Ethics: Yuddha Dharma

The Kurukshetra War is a matter of political ethics as well as moral dilemma. The Mahabharata establishes the principles of just behaviour, non-combatant protection, and treating adversaries with compassion. "अहिंसा परमो धर्मः युद्धे तु न अहिंसा एव।"

Ahimsa eva, yuddhe tu na ahimsa paramo dharmah. Despite being the greatest virtue, non-violence is not the norm in times of conflict. (Parva Anusasana 149.10). This shloka demonstrates moral realism by admitting that in order to restore justice, force may occasionally be required. This conflict between duty and emotion is embodied by Arjuna's hesitancy on the battlefield and Krishna's advice in the Bhagavad Gita

The statement "कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।" Karmany-evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana) You have the right to take action, but not to reap the rewards of it. (Gita Bhagavad 2.47). This doctrine reinterprets political activity as detached and duty-bound, driven by Dharma rather than outcome-seeking.

### A Comparative Analysis of Arthashastra and the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata incorporates ethical and spiritual aspects, whereas Kautilya's Arthashastra concentrates on the practical art of politics. Bhishma and Vidura view Danda as a moral obligation, but Kautilya views it as a means of control.

Aspect	Mahabharata	Arthashastra
Basis of Rule	Dharma	Utility and Power
Purpose of Danda	Moral Order	Political Stability
Ethics	Central	Instrumental
Ideal Leader	Dharma-guided King	Shrewd Administrator

Two opposing but complimentary viewpoints on government and the function of Danda (authority or punishment) are presented in the Mahabharata and Kautilya's Arthashastra. Through the teachings of Bhishma and Vidura, the Mahabharata combines politics with ethics and spirituality, but Kautilya's Arthashastra embodies the pragmatic science of politics, emphasizing control, surveillance, and statecraft. For Bhishma and Vidura, Danda is not merely a tool of coercion but a moral obligation rooted in Dharma; it must protect rather than oppress. Bhishma declares, "Dandah Sarvabhutanam Palakah" (punishment protects all beings), emphasizing that its legitimacy arises only when guided by righteousness. Kautilya, on the other hand, contends that the strong would eat the weak without Danda and sees it as an essential tool of control to preserve social order and avert anarchy. Therefore, Kautilya's monarch is a strategic administrator whose legitimacy depends on stable and effective governance, whereas the Mahabharata sees the ruler as a moral steward whose authority stems from virtue. When taken as a whole, they represent the two pillars of Indian political philosophy: Artha, or the practical art of governing, and Dharma, or the ethical compass.

This shows that the real power of governance is found in striking a balance between political realism and moral obligation.

Thus, the Mahabharata embodies what contemporary scholars would refer to as ethical pragmatism—a blend of idealism and reality.

### Current Significance

The Mahabharata's moral-political outlook is still incredibly applicable today. The epic's emphasis on the inseparability of morality and governance bears lasting significance in a world beset by global challenges, including social injustice, environmental degradation, political polarization, and ethical deterioration in leadership. The Mahabharata reminds us that societal harmony and sustained governance are only possible when political authority is grounded in moral responsibility, despite the fact that ethics and power are frequently treated as conflicting forces in modern politics. According to Vidura and Bhishma, leadership is an exercise in self-control, empathy, and service to the common good rather than a quest for individual ambition.

The tenets of contemporary Indian political philosophy are strongly aligned with the ethical aspects of Dharma in governance. The ahimsa (non-violence) doctrine of Mahatma Gandhi, The tenets of contemporary Indian political philosophy are strongly aligned with the ethical aspects of Dharma in governance. Jawaharlal Nehru's morally based diplomacy, Mahatma Gandhi's Ahimsa philosophy of non-violence, and the Indian Constitution's emphasis on responsibility, equality, and fairness all demonstrate the Mahabharata's fundamental belief that legitimacy comes from righteousness rather than just power. "धर्म एव हतो हन्ति, धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः," the poem " (Dharma eva hato hanti, dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ — Shanti Parva 39.1), encapsulates this timeless truth: when moral order is violated, it destroys its violator; when preserved, it protects both ruler and realm. As a result, the Mahabharata provides a universal paradigm for moral leadership that goes beyond its legendary setting. According to its teachings, upholding Dharma—the moral code that upholds justice, peace, and human dignity—is the starting point and the conclusion of the science of statecraft. In the contemporary world, where power often overshadows principle, the epic's wisdom serves as both a warning and a guide: true leadership endures only when guided by conscience and anchored in righteousness.

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