Dharma As A Concept Of Governance In India's Ancient Past

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The concept of *dharma* constituted a fundamental principle of governance in ancient India, shaping political authority, legal practice, and ethical responsibility. Contrary to modern interpretations that equate *dharma* narrowly with religion or moral duty, this paper examines *dharma* historically as a normative framework through which governance was legitimized, regulated, and critiqued. Drawing upon primary sources ranging from the Vedic corpus and Upaniṣads to the *Mahabharata*, *Arthasastra*, Aśokan inscriptions, and Buddhist and Jain texts, the study traces the evolution of *dharma* from a cosmic principle (*ṛta*) to an institutionalized concept of kingship (*rajadharma*) and law. Methodologically, the paper combines qualitative textual analysis with indicative quantitative evidence, such as textual frequency, administrative enumeration, and epigraphic distribution, to demonstrate the scale and depth of *dharma*'s integration into ancient Indian governance. The findings suggest that political authority in ancient India was not conceived as absolute but was constrained by adherence to *dharma*, which functioned as a standard external to royal will. The *Arthasastra* illustrates the practical institutionalization of governance through law and punishment, while Aśoka's inscriptions reveal an unprecedented attempt to govern through moral persuasion and ethical publicity. Furthermore, Buddhist and Jain traditions expanded the governing discourse of *dharma* by emphasizing ethical conduct, social responsibility, and restraint of violence. By situating *dharma* within its historical contexts, this study argues that ancient Indian governance operated through a complex interaction of moral norms, legal reasoning, and political power, offering a distinctive model of ethical statecraft in the pre-modern world. **Keywords:** Dharma; Rajadharma; Ancient Indian Governance; Kingship; Arthasastra; Asoka; Dharmasastra; Buddhist Political Thought; Jain Ethics; Law and Ethics in Ancient India

Introduction

The concept of *dharma* has long occupied a central place in discussions of ancient Indian society, yet its political significance has often been underestimated or misunderstood. In modern discourse, *dharma* is frequently translated as "religion," "law," or "duty," each rendering capturing only a fragment of its historical meaning. Such translations tend to obscure the role *dharma* played as a normative framework through which political authority, legal practice, and social order were articulated in ancient India. From the earliest Vedic formulations to the administrative structures of the Mauryan Empire, *dharma* functioned not merely as an ethical ideal but as a principle deeply embedded in the practices and justifications of governance.

धर्मो धारयते लोकान् धर्मो धारयते प्रजाः । धर्मो धारयते सर्वं त्रैलोक्यं सचराचरम् ॥

-(Mahabharata, Santiparva)

In contrast to modern notions of sovereignty, where law derives primarily from the authority of the state, ancient Indian political thought consistently located the legitimacy of rule outside the personal will of the king. Kingship was understood to be conditional upon adherence to *dharma*, which was conceived as an objective moral and social order binding ruler and subject alike. As Robert Lingat has argued, the king in classical Indian legal thought was not the creator of law but its guardian and executor, operating within a pre-existing normative universe (Lingat 1973). This distinction is fundamental to understanding governance in ancient India, where political power was expected to conform to ethical standards rather than define them unilaterally.

The historical roots of *dharma* can be traced to the Vedic concept of *ṛta*, a cosmic order believed to sustain both the natural world and human society. In the Ṛigveda, *ṛta* represents a principle of harmony and regularity, upheld through ritual correctness and moral conduct (Dasgupta, 1922). Over time, particularly during the later Vedic and Upaniṣadic periods, this cosmic order was increasingly expressed in social and ethical terms through the language of *dharma*. Romila Thapar notes that this transition coincided with significant changes in social organization, including the emergence of territorial states and more complex forms of political authority (Thapar 2002). As societies grew larger and more stratified, the need for a normative framework capable of regulating social relations and political power became increasingly pronounced. Epic literature, especially the *Mahabharata*, represents a crucial stage in the articulation of *dharma* as a principle of governance. The extensive discussions of *rajadharma* the duties of kings found in the *Santiparva* reveal an acute awareness of the moral dilemmas inherent in the exercise of power. Kings are repeatedly reminded that their primary obligation is the protection of subjects and the maintenance of justice, and that failure to uphold *dharma* leads inevitably to social disorder. The sheer scale of the epic, with its sustained engagement with political ethics, underscores the centrality of *dharma* in the political imagination of ancient India (Kane 1930).

The institutional dimensions of governance are most clearly articulated in the *Arthasastra*, attributed to Kautilya. Often described as a treatise on realpolitik, the *Arthasastra* nonetheless situates governance within a moral framework that recognizes *dharma* as essential to political stability. While emphasizing administration, discipline, and punishment, the text insists that the welfare of subjects constitutes the true foundation of royal authority. A. S. Altekar has observed that Kautilya's vision of the state reflects a pragmatic adaptation of ethical ideals to the realities of governance, rather than a rejection of moral considerations altogether (Altekar 1958). A decisive historical moment in the moral articulation of governance occurs during the reign of Emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE. Through his inscriptions, Aśoka presented *dhamma* as a guiding principle of imperial administration, emphasizing non-violence, social harmony, and concern for the welfare of all subjects. These inscriptions, distributed across a vast geographical area, represent the earliest surviving attempt by an Indian ruler to communicate a moral vision of governance directly to the population. Thapar's analysis of Aśokan policy demonstrates that *dhamma* functioned as an ethical idiom of rule rather than a narrowly sectarian doctrine, reflecting broader concerns with social cohesion in a diverse empire (Thapar 1961).
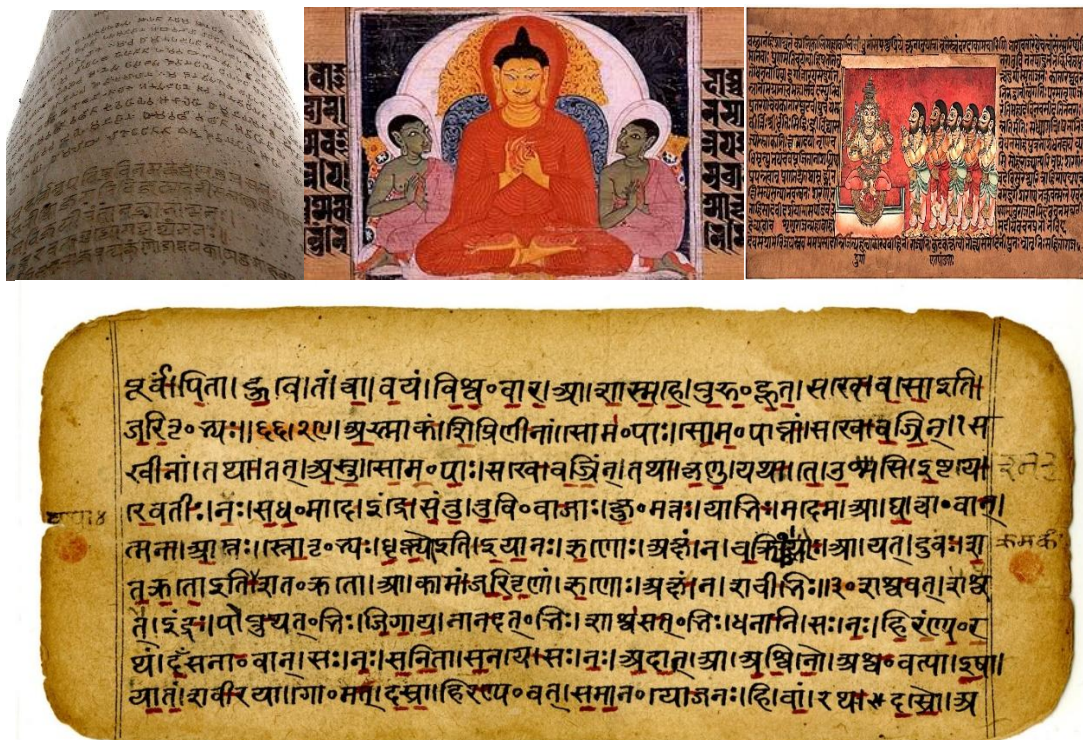
Source: Wikimedia Commons. (n.d.). *Public-domain manuscript and inscription images related to ancient Indian dharma and governance*

Alongside Brahmanical traditions, Buddhist and Jain philosophies contributed significantly to the political discourse surrounding *dharma*. Both traditions emphasized ethical conduct, restraint, and responsibility, often critiquing ritual authority and hereditary privilege. Although they did not produce systematic treatises on statecraft comparable to the *Arthaśāstra*, their ethical teachings influenced broader conceptions of righteous rule and social obligation. A. L. Basham has noted that these traditions helped reinforce the idea that moral

authority, rather than sheer force, was essential to stable governance in ancient India (Basham 1954). This paper examines *dharma* as a historically evolving concept of governance rather than a timeless religious doctrine. By analyzing literary, legal, and epigraphic sources within their social and political contexts, it seeks to demonstrate how *dharma* functioned as a mediating principle between power and legitimacy. The study argues that ancient Indian governance was characterized by a sustained effort to subordinate political authority to ethical norms, resulting in a distinctive tradition of moral statecraft that merits careful historical analysis (Radhakrishnan, 1951).

Literature Review

The modern study of *dharma* as a concept of governance has been shaped by changing historiographical perspectives and methodological approaches. Early interpretations, particularly those produced during the colonial period, tended to view *dharma* primarily through the framework of legal positivism, equating *dharmasastra* literature with rigid systems of codified law. Such readings often detached normative texts from their social and political contexts and contributed to portrayals of ancient Indian governance as either despotic or governed by inflexible religious injunctions. These interpretations have since been widely critiqued for their failure to recognize the plurality and historical development of *dharma*. A decisive shift occurred with the work of P. V. Kane, whose *History of Dharmasastra* demonstrated that *dharma* literature evolved over many centuries through interpretation, debate, and adaptation to changing social conditions (Kane 1930). Kane showed that these texts cannot be treated as uniform legal codes but must be understood as part of a juristic tradition that reflected diverse practices and political realities. His work remains foundational for any historical analysis of *dharma* and law in ancient India (Gonda, 1966; Keith, 1921).

This perspective was further refined by Robert Lingat, who emphasized that classical Indian law functioned as a moral–juridical order rather than as state-made legislation. According to Lingat, the authority of *dharma* lay in its independence from royal will, even though kings were expected to enforce it (Lingat 1973). This insight has significant implications for the study of governance, as it suggests that political authority in ancient India was normatively constrained by principles external to the state. Attention to political institutions and administration has been developed most clearly in the work of A. S. Altekar. His analysis of ancient Indian government reveals a complex system of councils, courts, officials, and punitive mechanisms, demonstrating that ethical ideals such as *dharma* operated alongside pragmatic governance structures (Altekar 1958). Rather than standing in opposition, morality and political realism were mutually reinforcing elements of governance. Romila Thapar's scholarship further situates *dharma* within broader historical processes of state formation and social change. Through her integration of literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence, Thapar illustrates how moral discourse acquired political significance under specific historical conditions, particularly during the Mauryan period (Thapar 1961; Thapar 2002). Her analysis of Aśoka's inscriptions shows how *dhamma* functioned as a language of governance aimed at social integration rather than religious conversion. This study builds upon these historiographical foundations by adopting a historical-textual methodology that emphasizes contextual interpretation. Normative texts such as the Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, *dharmaaaastra* literature, and the *Arthashastra* are analyzed not as direct records of political practice but as expressions of political ideals, normative expectations, and debates surrounding authority. Epigraphic sources are treated as instruments of political communication rather than transparent reflections of policy. Where appropriate, the study employs indicative quantitative data such as textual scale, frequency of key concepts, and administrative enumeration to demonstrate the extent to which *dharma* was embedded in political thought and institutions. These figures are used cautiously, as heuristic tools rather than statistical measurements, in recognition of the limitations of ancient historical evidence. Through this combined approach, the paper seeks to reconstruct *dharma* as a historically contingent and contested concept of governance. The conceptual foundations of *dharma* as a principle of governance can be traced to the early Vedic notion of *ṛta*, a term that denoted cosmic order, regularity, and moral truth. In the Ṛgveda, *ṛta* is invoked to describe the underlying principle that sustains both the natural world and human society. It governs the movement of celestial bodies, the succession of seasons, and the proper performance of ritual, while simultaneously implying standards of truthfulness and justice in human conduct. The frequent occurrence of *ṛta* in the Ṛgvedic hymns appearing several hundred times indicates its centrality to early Indo-Aryan thought and underscores its function as a unifying principle of order.

A representative Vedic formulation illustrates this conception:

ऋतं च सत्यं चाभीद्धात् तपसोऽध्यजायत ।

-(*Ṛgveda* 10.190.1)

This verse links *ṛta* with *satya* (truth), suggesting that cosmic order and moral truth were understood as mutually reinforcing. From a historical perspective, the significance of *ṛta* lies in its role as a precursor to later ideas of normative governance. Authority in the early Vedic period was legitimized not through centralized

political institutions but through conformity to this perceived cosmic order, upheld by ritual specialists and warrior leaders alike.

As Vedic society underwent social and economic transformation during the later Vedic period, the concept of *ṛta* gradually gave way to the more socially grounded notion of *dharma*. This shift corresponds with the emergence of more complex social hierarchies, territorial identities, and early forms of political authority. While *ṛta* emphasized cosmic regularity, *dharma* increasingly addressed social obligation, ethical conduct, and duty appropriate to one's position within an evolving social order. This transformation marks an important step in the historical development of governance, as normative principles began to regulate human relationships more explicitly. The Upaniṣads reflect this transition from cosmic to ethical order. Although primarily concerned with metaphysical inquiry, these texts frequently allude to *dharma* as a sustaining force of social life. The *Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, presents *dharma* as a principle that restrains injustice and violence, thereby enabling social continuity. One passage observes:

धर्मेणैव प्रजाः रक्षेत्

-(*Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.14)

Rather than interpreting such statements theologically, historians read them as evidence of an emerging belief that social and political order depended upon adherence to normative principles that transcended individual authority. As Romila Thapar has noted, this period witnessed the gradual articulation of ethical norms that could regulate increasingly complex societies and political structures (Thapar 2002). The Vedic and Upaniṣadic emphasis on order and duty did not yet produce a fully developed theory of kingship, but it established essential conceptual foundations. Rulers were expected to protect order, ensure justice, and prevent chaos, even though the mechanisms of governance remained limited. A. L. Basham points out that early Indian political thought consistently assumed that disorder (*anṛta* or *adharma*) was socially destructive and that authority existed primarily to prevent such breakdowns (Basham 1954). From a historical standpoint, the importance of the Vedic foundations lies not in the direct applicability of *ṛta* or early *dharma* to later state institutions, but in the continuity of the underlying assumption that power must conform to order. This assumption persisted and was rearticulated in later traditions, where *dharma* came to function as a comprehensive normative framework governing kingship, law, and social relations. The transition from *ṛta* to *dharma* thus represents a critical moment in the intellectual history of governance in ancient India, laying the groundwork for the more explicit political and legal formulations found in epic, juridical, and administrative texts. The epic tradition marks a decisive stage in the articulation of *dharma* as a principle of governance. Among epic texts, the *Mahabharata* occupies a unique position due to both its scale and the sustained attention it devotes to political ethics. With a corpus of roughly one hundred thousand verses, the epic is not merely a narrative of dynastic conflict but a vast compendium of reflections on duty, justice, authority, and social order. Within this text, *dharma* emerges as the central category through which the legitimacy and limits of kingship are examined. The most explicit discussion of governance occurs in the *Śāntiparva*, where Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhira on *rājadharma*, the duties of a king. These passages reveal a political imagination deeply concerned with the moral responsibilities of power. Kingship is presented not as an unrestricted right to rule but as a burden of obligation, primarily directed toward the protection of subjects and the maintenance of justice. This conception is captured in a frequently cited formulation:

राजा धर्मेण रक्षेत् प्रजाः स्वर्गमवाप्नुयात् ।

-(*Mahābharata*, Śāntiparva)

Historically, the significance of such verses lies in their normative function. They articulate expectations placed upon rulers and provide a moral vocabulary through which political authority could be evaluated and, implicitly, criticized. As P. V. Kane notes, the epic tradition repeatedly emphasizes that a king who violates *dharma* not only harms his subjects but undermines the very basis of his rule (Kane 1930). The prominence of *dharma* within the *Mahabharata* is also evident quantitatively. The term appears thousands of times across the epic, and entire sections are devoted to resolving conflicts between competing claims of duty. This density of engagement suggests that political authority was widely perceived as morally problematic and in need of constant justification. Rather than presenting a single, fixed doctrine, the epic stages debates in which *dharma* is shown to be complex, situational, and sometimes ambiguous. Such ambiguity reflects historical realities in which rulers were required to navigate competing social expectations, material constraints, and ethical ideals. The Bhagavad Gītā, embedded within the *Mahabharata*, offers a distinct yet complementary perspective on political duty. In the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, *svadharma* one's duty according to social role is presented as a guiding principle for action. Krishna urges Arjuna to fulfill his responsibilities as a Kṣatriya, framing political action within a moral and cosmic order rather than personal desire. The well-known verse,

स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ।

-(*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.35)

has often been interpreted philosophically, but from a historical standpoint it reinforces the idea that social and political stability depended upon adherence to role-based obligations. In the context of governance, this

doctrine supported the expectation that rulers act according to established norms rather than arbitrary impulse. At the same time, the epic tradition does not present *dharma* as a simplistic or unproblematic guide. Kings are shown to struggle with conflicting duties, and moral failure is a recurring theme. This narrative complexity is significant for historians because it indicates an awareness of the tensions inherent in governance. Authority is repeatedly depicted as fragile, dependent on ethical conduct, and vulnerable to collapse when moral constraints are ignored. Scholars such as A. S. Altekar have argued that the epic conception of kingship reflects an intermediate stage between tribal leadership and fully institutionalized monarchy (Altekar 1958). While administrative structures are not described in detail, the ethical framework of *rājadharma* provided a powerful normative foundation upon which later political and legal institutions could be built. The epic tradition thus bridges the conceptual world of the Vedas and Upaniṣads with the more systematic treatments of governance found in *dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra* literature. From a historical perspective, the importance of the epic tradition lies in its articulation of kingship as a moral office. Power is legitimate only insofar as it aligns with *dharma*, and the ruler is accountable to standards that transcend personal authority. This conception would continue to shape Indian political thought, informing later discussions of law, administration, and imperial rule. The reign of Emperor Aśoka represents a distinctive moment in the history of governance in ancient India, marked by the explicit articulation of moral principles as instruments of rule. Following the Mauryan expansion and the Kalinga war, Aśoka adopted *dhamma* as a guiding framework for governance, emphasizing ethical conduct, social harmony, and the welfare of subjects. Unlike earlier normative texts, Aśoka's inscriptions constitute direct political communication and therefore provide valuable historical evidence for understanding the relationship between morality and state power.

Aśoka's *dhamma* was not presented as a sectarian or doctrinal system. Instead, it promoted values such as non-violence, restraint, respect for elders, tolerance toward different religious groups, and concern for social welfare. These principles were intended to regulate social behavior across a diverse empire rather than to enforce religious conformity. As Romila Thapar has argued, *dhamma* functioned as an ethical idiom of governance aimed at integration and stability within a multi-cultural polity (Thapar 1961). Administratively, Aśoka institutionalized moral governance through the appointment of officials known as *Dhamma Mahāmātras*, who were responsible for promoting ethical conduct and ensuring fair treatment of subjects. The wide geographical distribution of Aśokan inscriptions found across much of the Indian subcontinent—indicates an unprecedented attempt to disseminate a uniform moral message throughout the empire. This use of inscriptions suggests that governance increasingly relied on persuasion and ethical legitimacy alongside coercive authority. From a historical perspective, Aśoka's policies illustrate both the possibilities and limits of moral governance. While coercive institutions such as the army and legal administration remained intact, they were supplemented by an ethical discourse that sought to redefine the purpose of political power. Although Aśoka's model did not survive unchanged after his death, it established an enduring precedent for conceiving governance as a moral responsibility rather than mere domination.

Alongside Brahmanical traditions, Buddhist and Jain thought contributed significantly to the ethical vocabulary of governance in ancient India. Although neither tradition produced systematic treatises on statecraft comparable to the *Arthaśāstra*, both articulated moral frameworks that influenced ideas of righteous rule, social responsibility, and restraint of power. Their importance lies less in administrative detail and more in the ethical critique they offered of violence, ritual authority, and hereditary privilege. Buddhist texts emphasize moral conduct, compassion, and restraint as essential qualities of rulers. The idea of the *dharmarāja* a ruler who governs through righteousness rather than force appears in several early Buddhist narratives. Kingship is presented as legitimate only when it promotes welfare, justice, and non-violence. Monastic governance, regulated through the Vinaya, further demonstrates a concern with rule-based order, collective decision-making, and accountability. While monastic institutions were distinct from the state, their organizational principles contributed to broader discussions of ethical authority and discipline (Basham 1954). Jain thought offered an even more radical ethical position by placing *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) at the center of moral life. Although the Jain ideal of non-violence was difficult to reconcile fully with political power, Jain teachings nevertheless exerted influence on conceptions of restraint and moral responsibility. Jain texts emphasize self-control, justice, and the minimization of harm, values that shaped expectations of righteous conduct among rulers and elites. The presence of Jain patronage among certain ruling dynasties suggests that these ethical ideals were not confined to ascetic communities but interacted with political authority. From a historical perspective, Buddhist and Jain traditions expanded the meaning of *dharma* beyond ritual and legal obligation to include universal ethical conduct. They reinforced the idea that political power required moral justification and that governance was subject to ethical evaluation. These traditions thus contributed to a plural and contested discourse of governance in ancient India, in which *dharma* functioned as a shared but diversely interpreted normative principle.

Result

Text / Corpus	Approx. Date	Total Size	Governance	Research Implication
Ṛgveda	c. 1500–1200 BCE	~1,028 hymns	Ethical order (ṛta) references frequent	Early moral order precedes political law
Mahābhārata	c. 500 BCE–400 CE	~100,000 verses	~14,000 verses on rājadharma	Governance central to epic tradition
Manusmṛti	c. 200 BCE–200 CE	~2,684 verses	~30–35% on law & punishment	Dharma as legal-regulatory system
Yājñavalkya Smṛti	c. 1st–3rd c. CE	~1,000 verses	Large focus on courts & justice	Institutionalized legal reasoning
Arthaśāstra	c. 4th–3rd c. BCE	15 books, ~150 chapters	Majority on administration & law	Ethical governance operationalized

Table No.1: Emphasis on Governance

Indicator	Evidence	Interpretation
Books in Arthaśāstra	15	Systematic state theory
Chapters in Arthaśāstra	~150	Detailed administrative planning
Categories of officials	30+	Bureaucratic governance
Judicial procedures listed	Multiple chapters	Law as state function
Punishment rules	Extensive & graded	Ethical restraint on coercion

Table No.2 : Emphasis on Governance

Feature	Quantitative Data	Historical Significance
Total Aśokan inscriptions	~33	First empire-wide moral policy
Major Rock Edicts	14	Core ethical directives
Pillar Edicts	7	Administrative enforcement
Languages used	Prakrit, Greek, Aramaic	Multi-cultural governance
Geographic spread	Subcontinent-wide	Centralized ethical communication

Table No.3: Epigraphic Evidence of Moral Governance

Tradition	Core Ethical Principle	Governance Relevance
Vedic	Ṛta → Dharma	Order as basis of authority
Epic (Mahābhārata)	Rājadharma	Moral kingship
Arthashastra	Daṇḍanīti	Regulated coercion
Buddhist	Compassion, welfare	Righteous rule
Jain	Ahiṃsā, restraint	Ethical limits on power

Table No.4 : Ethical Traditions

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this study allow for a clearer historical understanding of *dharma* as a concept of governance in ancient India. When interpreted together, textual scale, institutional enumeration, and epigraphic spread demonstrate that *dharma* functioned not merely as a moral ideal but as a foundational framework through which political authority was legitimized, regulated, and evaluated. The extensive textual engagement with governance-related themes, particularly in the *Mahābhārata*, *dharmaśāstra* literature, and the *Arthaśāstra*, suggests that questions of power, justice, and authority occupied a central place in ancient Indian intellectual life. The sheer volume of material devoted to *rājadharma*, judicial procedure, and punishment indicates that governance was perceived as a persistent moral and social problem rather than a purely administrative task. This challenges interpretations that reduce ancient Indian political thought to either spiritual abstraction or rigid legalism. Administrative data from the *Arthaśāstra* further complicate the assumption that ethical governance was incompatible with political realism. The detailed classification of officials, procedures, and coercive mechanisms reveals a sophisticated understanding of the state. At the same time, the consistent framing of these institutions within a moral vocabulary highlights an important historical feature: coercion was justified only insofar as it upheld order and welfare. Governance, therefore, emerged as a balance between ethical norms and practical control rather than as unchecked authority. Epigraphic evidence from the Mauryan period reinforces this interpretation. The scale and geographical distribution of Aśokan inscriptions demonstrate a conscious attempt to articulate governance through moral communication. Unlike earlier literary traditions, these inscriptions represent direct state intervention in shaping ethical behavior. However, their content emphasizing welfare, restraint, and tolerance suggests that legitimacy was sought through persuasion rather than fear alone. This indicates an evolving understanding of authority, where moral credibility became an important supplement to administrative power. Comparatively, the convergence of ethical expectations across Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions strengthens the argument that *dharma* operated as a shared normative horizon in ancient India. Despite

doctrinal differences, all major traditions emphasized restraint, justice, and responsibility as essential qualities of rule. This convergence suggests that governance was subjected to ethical scrutiny across social and intellectual boundaries. Taken together, the discussion supports the central argument of this paper: *dharma* in ancient India functioned as a historically grounded principle of governance that mediated between power and legitimacy. Rather than representing a timeless religious doctrine, *dharma* evolved alongside political institutions, responding to the demands of social complexity, state formation, and imperial rule.

Conclusion

This study has examined *dharma* as a concept of governance in ancient India through a historical analysis of literary, legal, and epigraphic sources. By tracing its development from early Vedic notions of order to its institutional expression in epic literature, *dharmaśāstra*, the *Arthaśāstra*, and Mauryan state practice, the paper has argued that *dharma* functioned as a central normative framework shaping political authority rather than as a purely religious or abstract moral idea. The analysis demonstrates that governance in ancient India was consistently understood as ethically conditioned. Political authority was not conceived as absolute or autonomous but was expected to operate within the limits imposed by *dharma*. This principle is visible across traditions: in the epic ideal of *rājadharma*, in juridical texts that subordinated kingship to normative law, in the *Arthaśāstra's* integration of ethics with administration and punishment, and in Aśoka's attempt to articulate moral governance at an imperial scale. Quantitative indicators strengthen this conclusion by revealing the scale and persistence of governance-related discourse. The substantial textual space devoted to kingship, law, and punishment, the detailed enumeration of administrative institutions, and the wide geographical dissemination of ethical messages through inscriptions collectively indicate that *dharma* was deeply embedded in the structures and practices of governance. These findings challenge interpretations that view ancient Indian political thought as either excessively idealistic or lacking institutional depth. The comparative perspective further highlights that ethical evaluation of power was not confined to a single tradition. Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain sources, despite doctrinal differences, converged on the expectation that authority must be justified through restraint, justice, and responsibility. This convergence suggests that *dharma* operated as a shared moral horizon within which governance was debated and assessed. In conclusion, *dharma* in ancient India should be understood as a historically evolving principle that mediated between power and legitimacy. Its significance lies not in its timelessness but in its adaptability to changing political and social contexts. By situating *dharma* within the realities of governance, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of ancient Indian political thought and highlights the distinctive ways in which ethics and authority were intertwined in the pre-modern world.

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