



Dhārmic Leadership beyond the Gītā: A Comparative Study of Rājadharmā in Manusmṛti, Śānti Parva and Arthaśāstra

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Abstract

Contemporary discussions of Bhāratīya leadership ethics usually focus on the Bhagavad-Gītā, leaving aside a wider range of Saṃskṛta sources that deal directly with governance. Manusmṛti, the Śānti Parva of the Mahābhārata and Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra together present some of the most detailed early accounts of rājadharmā, organisational responsibility and value-driven political conduct. This study proposes a comparative textual analysis of these works in order to develop a nuanced model of "dhārmic leadership" relevant to the conference theme of Leadership and Ethics. The primary corpus will include Manusmṛti Ch.s 7–9 (king and administration), key adhyāyas of Śānti Parva on rājadharmā and selected books of the Arthaśāstra on the king's character, council and public welfare. The material will be thematically coded under virtues, decision-making processes, treatment of ministers and subjects, economic justice and organisational ethics including taxation, punishment and social responsibility. The analysis aims to show both convergence and divergence among these texts. Manusmṛti largely stresses norm-based kingship and social order; Śānti Parva foregrounds moral restraint, consultative rule and the king's accountability to dharma; Arthaśāstra combines ethical exhortation with political realism, emphasising competence, surveillance and welfare measures. Together, they yield a many-sided picture of dhārmic leadership that integrates character, motivation and institutional responsibility. The study hopes to provide a Saṃskṛta-grounded framework that can inform contemporary debates on ethical governance, public leadership training and value-based organisational culture.

Keywords: *rājadharma, dhārmic leadership, Manusmṛti, Śānti Parva, Arthaśāstra, organisational ethics, Sanskrit political thought*

Introduction

Contemporary academic discussion regarding Bhāratīya leadership ethics often privileges Bhagavad-Gītā, overlooking a wider corpus of Saṃskṛta literature which systematically addresses the sought qualities of leadership and governance. This paper wants to pursue to shorten that gap by foregrounding materials from Manusmṛti, Śānti Parva of Mahābhārata and Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra, each presenting sophisticated models of leadership rooted in ancient Bhāratīya concept yet highly relevant to ongoing debates on modern governance and value-driven organization.

Unpacking the concept of 'dhārmic leadership' and 'rājadharma', both linguistically and philosophically, the Sanskrit term धर्म (dharma) comes from root धृ meaning 'to possess' or 'to contain' leading to धारणात् इति धर्मः (dhāraṇāt iti dharmah), that is 'which uphold, sustains or supports' (Karna-parva, Mahābhārata 69.58). Therefore dharma can't be narrowed down to just rules but as the broader bedrock of 'natural and social order', capable of being consciously adopted and cultivated. Leadership or नेतृत्व (netṛtva), has its derivation from root नी (ni), meaning 'to lead' as in नयति (nayati), 'one who leads' or अग्रं नयति 'agram nayati' that is 'one who takes ahead'. The term 'राजन्' (king) is derived from the root 'रञ्ज', meaning 'to please'.

Therefore, dhārmic leadership can be referred to the leadership stance which actively guides individuals and communities towards collective prosperity and well-being, adhering to ethical norms and prescriptions elaborated in Indic texts.

While the term राजधर्म (rājadharma) refers to king's duty as the protector and nurturer of his subjects [राजधर्मान् प्रवक्ष्यामि यथावृत्तो भवेन्नृपः। (rājadharmān pravakṣyāmi yathāvṛtto bhavennṛpaḥ)] Manu. 7.1 that is "I am going to expound the duties of Kings; how the Lord of Men should conduct himself", principally and historically it extends beyond monarchs. In modern Bharat and elsewhere, the government and their executives are entrusted with ensuring 'public good', while every individual in position of responsibility can inculcate and embody the same values. Dhārmic leadership can be universalized, not being confined to only kings and political leaders rather than also relevant wherever it is about

guiding others or upholding order necessarily, regardless of it being in families or at a larger level.

This paper proposes to re-center the dhārmic leadership from three core early sources:

- The Manusmṛti, describing the first divine law maker and delineates the moral, social and administrative duties of rulers.
- The Śānti Parva of the Mahābhārata, where Bhīṣma, on his deathbed, instructs Yudhiṣṭhira systematically in profound codes of governance after the traumatic great war.
- The Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya, offering pragmatic and starkly realistic theory of statecraft, emphasizing the importance of competence, vigilance and institutionalized welfare mechanisms.

By drawing on these foundational texts, the paper seeks to construct a nuanced, plural and Sanskritically grounded model of Dhārmic leadership, applicable from personal to national level, equipping contemporary leaders with ethical and practical touchstones for fostering prosperity and harmony in diverse spheres of life.

Moving further, we'll see how the concept of rājadharmā or dhārmic leadership and various aspects under it evolved in due course of time, from very utopian and normative ideals of Manusmṛti to practical ethics of Śānti Parvati-Parv to idealistic yet political realism of Arthaśāstra.

King - Duties & Expectations:

In ancient Bharat, kings were seen as the original exemplars of dhārmic leadership, who were entrusted with upholding dharma and even ensuring that subjects too, for the collective welfare of all and ultimately swarga or infinite bliss (anantya). This view is well assisted by foundational Saṃskṛta texts, which presents a broader yet integrated understanding of kingship and governance.

Manusmṛti offers a detailed discussion about an ideal king, his duties and moral expectations. Medhatithi's commentary further clarifies that a king's duty is twofold: first, duties pertaining to visible things, tangible and practical actions of governance such as the Ṣaḍguṇya or six-fold foreign policy, including strategies like Sandhi (peace/alliance),

Vigraha (war), Yāna (campaign), Āsana (neutrality), Saṃśraya (seeking shelter) and Dvaidhibhāva (duplicity), designed for effective rule and the expansion of influence. Second, duties pertaining to invisible things, spiritual and ritualistic obligations, manifested through Vaidika rites or yajña such as Agnihotra are intended to uphold the cosmic order (ṛta) and ensuring social and universal harmony.

This dual role of the king is underscored in Manusmṛti where the king is bestowed with godly powers (Manu 7.4 & 7), serving as the protector of his subjects and dispenser of justice (Manu 7.2).

ब्राह्मं प्राप्तेन संस्कारं क्षत्रियेण यथाविधि ।
सर्वस्यास्य यथान्यायं कर्तव्यं परिरक्षणम् ॥

brāhmaṃ prāptena saṃskāraṃ kṣatriyeṇa yathāvidhi |
sarvasyāsya yathānyāyaṃ kartavyaṃ parirakṣaṇam || (Manu 7.2)

The Śānti Parva likewise highlights the king as the embodiment of Indra, Yama and Dharma - as the sustainer and protector of all, whose foremost duty is to dispel anarchy and enable people to live peacefully without fear and enjoy all pleasures. Kingship becomes the foundation of sacrifice and cosmic order (Śānti Parva Ch. 72). Even Manu (7.8 & 11) caution against disrespecting the king due to his divine nature, even in his infant state. A king is expected to always act with caution and same goes with subjects when interacting with him (Manu 7.10).

Discipline and restraint over organs of sense are recurring themes in these texts. As Manusmṛti warns,

अतस्तु विपरीतस्य नृपतेरजितात्मनः ।
सङ्घिष्यते यशो लोके घृतबिन्दुरिवाम्भसि ॥

atastu viparītasya nṛpaterajitātmanaḥ |
saṅkṣipyate yaśo loke ghr̥tabindurivāmbhasi || (Manu 7.34)

an undisciplined king is doomed to decline just like a drop of clarified butter disperses completely on the water surface. Historical examples illustrate this as well - many kings

perished due to their vice, neglect of dharma or pride - and their stories serve as cautionary tales (Manu 7.41).

- Vena - greedy and impious, he forbade sacrifices and exploited his people, sages slew him and from his body arose the righteous successor Prithu.
- Nahusha - arrogant after gaining Indra's throne, he insulted sages and was cursed to fall from heaven and become a serpent.
- Sudas - once winner of battle of ten kings, his pride and neglect of dharma led to internal strife and fall of his lineage.
- Pajavana (Sahadev) - misled by false pride, he defied divine law and perished when his own misconduct turned gods against him.
- Samukha (Samvart) - his cruelty towards his subjects, displeased seers and divine retribution struck him down in battle.
- Nimi - attempting to perform a long yajña without Vasishtha earned him his wrath and curse, he later reborned as a bodiless spirit.

Contrastingly, many kings exemplify too how discipline and righteousness lead to greatness and restoration of order (Manu 7.42).

- Prithu - born from Vena's body, ruled with righteousness and self-control, restoring order and abundance to the earth.
- Manu - by strict discipline and devotion upheld cosmic law and was granted kingship as the first lawgiver of humankind.
- Kubera - through severe austerities and moral restraint, he pleased Brahma who made him lord of wealth and guardian of the north.
- Vishwamitra (son of Gadhi) - once a proud king, he practiced intense tapas until his discipline transformed him into a Brahman by merit, not by birth.

The nature of kingship and its eternal responsibilities is also illuminated in the Śānti Parva, where Yudhiṣṭhira's query to Bhīṣma prompts a rich discussion and emphasizes that election and coronation of a king is the foremost duty, as a kingdom without a ruler descends into anarchy with lawlessness and people harming each other. This prevents righteousness and prosperity and even sinful men long for a king to restore order. Gods created kings to protect the weak from the strong, ensuring social harmony. When people sought Manu's acceptance to be king he hesitated due to the difficulty of ruling deceitful men, but was pursued by promises of wealth, support and respect. Empowered, Manu enforced justice,

curbed wickedness and upheld duties. People should always humbly honor the king, as a respected king commands reverence even from foes. To enable effective governance, kings should be provided with appropriate honors and all necessary resources. He should rule with kindness, gratitude, restraint and fairness, treating subjects with gentleness and giving everyone their due. An honored king always ensures protection, prosperity and peace for his kingdom (Śānti Parva Ch. 67).

Discussing further, self-mastery is said to be the bedrock of external conquest and a king's prime duty before mastery over his enemies..

भिक्षुकांश्चाक्रिकांश्चैव क्षीबोन्मत्तान्कुशीलवान् ।
बाह्यान्कुर्यान्नरश्रेष्ठ दोषाय स्युर्हि तेऽन्यथा ॥ ४९ ॥

bhikṣukāṃścākrikāṃścaiva kṣībōnmattāṅkuśīlavān |
bāhyānkuryānnaraśreṣṭha doṣāya syurhi te'nyathā || (Śānti-Parva 69.49).

Strategic deployment of troops in forts, cities, palaces and employment of skilled spies, both domestically and abroad, are stressed for maintaining vigilance and pre-empting enemies' moves. Upon facing stronger foes, the king is advised to seek peace and strategic alliances with them. Confidence is key for leading the military to the mouth of success; yet unnecessary wars are discouraged for diplomacy, territorial gains and planning discord among rivals (Śānti Parva Ch. 69).

Building upon these themes, Arthaśāstra asserts that upholding one's own duty leads to svarga and infinite bliss. The king must ensure that his subjects remain steadfast towards their duties (Book 1, Ch. 3). The ruler's energy and attentiveness directly influences his realm's vigour and vice-versa. A reckless ruler is bound to fall prey to his enemies. Even his psychological state affects the well-being of the realm and on the other hand his selfishness undermines both state and his people. Activity is thus posited as the foundation of wealth as well as prosperity. Active leadership is crucial for enduring abundance and success (Book 1, Ch. 19).

Virtues & Moral Character:

A dhārmic leader in the Indic traditional system is defined by truthfulness, prudence and wisdom, balancing joy and responsibility while remaining impartial in justice. Ancient

texts like the Manusmṛti, Śānti Parva and Arthaśāstra emphasize self-restraint, compassion and integrity in leadership, viewing these virtues and moral values as essential for both ruler and his subject's prosperity.

Manusmṛti is very particular that the king's merit and character rest values such as

- Satya (truthfulness), meaning to perceive things in its *yathārtha* state, that is as it is in reality - for example, while inflicting punishment it should be exactly as the law prescribes, without favouritism toward anyone, wealthy or poor, friend or foe.
- Prudence, that is the king should act after due deliberation and consideration, weighing his decisions carefully.
- Prajñā (wisdom), embodying this virtue by recognizing how time, place and circumstances i.e. chronotopes interact, their interplay and intrinsic connectedness. Often when the influence of one nullifies the other, it's this wisdom only which can override it. For example, sometimes sacrifice of a lesser virtue is required to prevent greater harm, but the king should rightfully seek penance and atone for it.
- In knowing the essence of dharma (virtue), artha (wealth) and kāma (desires), he must acquire wealth through virtuous means and fulfil righteous desires supported by that wealth only (Manu 7.26).

तस्याहुः सम्प्रणेतारं राजानं सत्यवादिनम् ।
समीक्ष्यकारिणं प्राज्ञं धर्मकामार्थकोविदम् ॥

*tasyāhuḥ sampraṇetāraṃ rājānaṃ satyavādinam |
samīkṣyakāriṇaṃ prājñaṃ dharmakāmārthakovidam || (Manu 7.26)*

Bhīṣma, in Śānti Parva, lists thirty-six virtues, highlighting restraint from wrath and malice, kindness, faith and just acquisition of wealth. A ruler should balance joy and duty, be pleasant and brave in speech without arrogance, practice generous but discerning charity and avoid alliances with wicked (Śānti Parva ch. 70). Protection and compassion for subjects is the highest virtue and merit; neglecting his duties leads a king to negative karmic consequences; only the righteous king can acquire extraordinary spiritual and worldly benefits by upholding dhārmic protection of his people (Śānti Parva ch. 71).

इदं वचः शांतनवस्य शुश्रुवान्युधिष्ठिरः पाण्डवमुख्यसंवृतः ।

तदा ववन्दे च पितामहं नृपो यथोक्तमेतच्च चकार बुद्धिमान् ॥ १४ ॥

*idaṃ vacaḥ śāmtanavasya śuśruvānyudhiṣṭhiraḥ pāṇḍavamukhyasamvṛtaḥ |
tadā vavande ca pitāmahaṃ nṛpo yathoktametacca cakāra buddhimān || (Śānti-Parva 71.14)*

Even a weak ally deserves respect if he is righteous, grateful and keeps his subjects satisfied with loyalty and perseverance. In contrast, a dangerous enemy is intelligent, noble, brave, clever and resilient, while ideal neutrals are characterized by decency, generosity, insight and compassion (Manu 7.209-211), conveying that morality, benevolence, and wisdom matter greatly in both leadership and alliances. Similarly, the Arthaśāstra affirms that, among friends, gold and land, the friend is most valuable.

Arthaśāstra stresses that success depends on restraining organs of sense, enforced by abandoning lust, anger, greed, vanity, arrogance and over-excitement. It substantiates this with numerous examples of kings who perished due to their indulgence in these vices. Bhoja (Dāṇḍakyā) perished for his lust, Janamejay for anger, Aila for greed, Rāvaṇa for his vanity, Duryodhāna for refusing to share his kingdom, Arjun (Haihaya kingdom) for arrogance, Vatapi due to his wrong deed done under the influence of over-joy and Vriśnis for his hostile behaviour. Kings falling prey to these six-enemies or failing to restrain their sense organs were ruined along with their kingdom. At the same time, rulers like Ambarīṣa and Nabhāga thrived due to practicing restraint (Arthaśāstra, Book 1, ch. 6). In short, the king's actions shape his fate and those of his subjects. Dhārmic leadership is marked by control over desires, passions, wise counselling, vigilance, discipline, learning, generosity and fair enforcement of duty through vigilance. By controlling desires, consistently balancing three pursuits of life - charity, wealth and desire - and recognizing wealth as foundation of acquiring other two, as Kauṭilya teaches (Arthaśāstra, Book 1, ch. 7), the ruler avoids harm and falsehood.

Decision-making and Consultation:

A great leadership depends on wisdom, consistent learning and a team of trustworthy advisors. Ancient Indian texts guide us that rulers cannot succeed alone, they need discipline, knowledgeable counselors, genuine friends and attentive ministers to govern effectively and keep their kingdom on track.

Manusmṛti makes it clear that kings should always consult the experienced and learned Brahmins who are well-versed in the Ṛgveda, Yajurved and Sāmaveda (7.37 & 38).

Consultation is essential despite the king being disciplined and educated in politics and related matters. Practical insights of elders are beneficial since experience matters more than theoretical knowledge. Since perfection is a never ending process, rulers must keep training their grey cells under guidance of experts and elders to sharpen their abilities and make his aptitude even more keen. Medhatithi wisely compares this learning to purification of gold, although pure and shiny by nature, the gold becomes more pure and shines even brighter when undergone through fire again and again. A disciplined king never perishes (Manu. 7.39).

तेभ्योऽधिगच्छेद् विनयं विनीतात्माऽपि नित्यशः ।

विनीतात्मा हि नृपतिर्न विनश्यति कर्हि चित् ॥

tebhyo'dhigacched vinayaṃ vinītātmā'pi nityaśaḥ |
vinītātmā hi nṛpatirna vinaśyati karhi cit || (Manu. 7.39)

Arthaśāstra supports this, noting that punishment ensures safety only when it is based upon discipline, discipline is duly cultivated through learning, contemplation, reasoning and listening (8.34). The king should fix his teachers and ministers as checks upon himself, since they would prevent him from taking inappropriate stances. Just as a chariot needs multiple wheels to move forward, kingship requires ministers who are respected and whose advice is valued to move forward towards prosperity. Kings must avoid giving governmental responsibility to those who lack judgment (Śānti Parva Ch. 71). Priests should be appointed to protect the good and punish the wicked. Wisdom and guidance from Brahmins are highlighted in the Purūravā and Mātariśvan dialogue (Śānti Parva Ch. 72) and happiness in the kingdom is tied to Brahmins who dispels invisible fears and kings who handle visible dangers. But true leadership is measured by the king's virtue and merit, not just by divine power (Śānti Parva Ch. 73).

स्वमेव ब्राह्मणो भुङ्क्ते स्वं वस्ते स्वं ददाति च ।

गुरुर्हि सर्ववर्णानां ज्येष्ठः श्रेष्ठश्च वै द्विजः ॥

svameva brāhmaṇo bhun̄kte svaṃ vāste svaṃ dadāti ca |
gururhi sarvavarṇānām jyeṣṭhaḥ śreṣṭhaśca vai dvijah || (Śānti Parva Ch. 73.11)

Arthaśāstra adds that the king should appoint a high priest from a respected family, skilled in Vedas and at rituals, and able to prevent calamities through proper rites. The king should

follow the priest as a student follows a teacher, a son his father, and a servant his master (Book 1 ch 9). A king should always appoint his personal attendants who come from families with a history of royal service, having close ties to the palace, are well-trained, loyal and demonstrated good service (Book 1 ch 21).

When Bhīṣma advises Yudhiṣṭhira, he stresses that kings and ministers must balance trust and suspicion. Kings can't act alone, ministers and friends are vital for effective governance. Righteous friends should be compromised with secret plans only if necessary. The king must balance both righteous and unrighteous paths for success, keeping vigilance over all types of friends. He should personally supervise key areas, as total reliance on ministers may lead to expiration of morality and profit. Those desiring king's wealth are natural enemies, genuine friends celebrate prosperity and share misfortunes, such friends are to be completely trusted and should be honoured. Looks and wealth alone do not define a good friend. Ministers should be smart, intelligent, patient, fair yet clever in business, compassionate and free from anger. They deserve respect and access to confidential matters. Assigning tasks based on abilities keeps rivalries and disagreements low and harmony high. Foremost ministers should be famous, wise, virtuous, capable, unjealous, brave, loyal, educated and fairly rewarded. Kith and kin should be honoured publicly, but caution should be maintained, as rivalry is bound to occur among family members. A wise king balances affection with careful skepticism. Wise conduct among friends, enemies and kin brings lasting fame and success (Śānti Parva Ch. 73).

Competence and Practical Governance:

Competence in leadership comes from co-operation, careful appointing assistants and practical wisdom. Ancient Bhāratīya texts describe how an ideal king, despite personal abilities or prosperity, must value teamwork, sound advice and a strong ethical foundation. This helps him to successfully govern and protect his people and adapt to challenges, making dhārmic leadership a tradition built on wisdom and competence.

The king's competence, along with his ministers and assistants, is vital for effective rule. As Medhatithi explains, a solitary monarch, however clever, is like a general without troops, he can't win battles or bestow punishments for justice alone by himself (Manu. 7.30). Even with fertile and prosperous territory, wise governance demands the king to prioritize protection of his realm, wealth, family and ultimately himself above personal attachment. The

wise king skilfully employs all available strategies when facing multiple simultaneous challenges to secure his survival and uphold his duties (Manu. 7.212-214). This reflects the pragmatistic and measured wisdom, expected from an ideal king.

क्षेम्यां सस्यप्रदां नित्यं पशुवृद्धिकरीमपि ।
परित्यजेन्नृपो भूमिमात्मार्थमविचारयन् ॥

kṣemyām sasyapradām nityam paśuvṛddhikarīmapi |
parityajennṛpo bhūmimātmārthamavicārayan || (Manu. 7.212)

Bhīṣma urges a king to protect his family, maintain his sanctity, moderate pleasures and treat subjects with generosity. He should control his temper and show mild leniency to the repentant. Kings are advised to time actions wisely, avoid infamy and support the virtuous while steering clear of malice (Śānti Parva Ch. 70).

Surveillance and intelligence are essential. A treacherous spy can read minds but act deceitfully, after rewarding such agents, ministers should always secure loyal service to the royal (Arthaśāstra Book 1 Ch. 11). Kings should be attentive to reports from spies and deploy trusted agents to ensure fair and non-cruel investigations. Confidentiality in counsel, impartial punishment, humility and respect towards elders and teachers are most essentials (Manu. 7.223 & Śānti Parva Ch. 70).

ततो वसति दुष्कर्मा नरके शाश्वतीः समाः ।
प्रजानां कल्मषे मग्नोऽकीर्तिं पापं च विन्दति ॥

tato vasati duṣkarmā narake śāśvatīḥ samāḥ |
prajānām kalmaṣe magno'kīrtiṃ pāpaṃ ca vindati || (Śānti Parva Ch. 70.28)

S. Garg notes that Bhīṣma's teachings defend royal authority through two principles - first, a kṣatriya's dharma operating as ordinary morality and second, the king's duty to protect as the highest form of morality.

The Arthaśāstra presents diverse views on appointing ministers. Bharadvāja favours trusted classmates, while Vviśālākṣa warns against appointing childhood friends due to potential disrespect. Parāśara emphasizes appointing loyal ministers who prove faithful in

adversity, though Piśuna values ability demonstrated via fiscal competence. Kaṇapadanta advises hereditary ministers for loyalty rooted in tradition, whereas Vāṭavyādhi stresses hiring new experts in statecraft to prevent power abuse. Bahudanti's son insists on combining wisdom, noble birth, and loyalty. Kauṭilya synthesizes these views, prioritising demonstrated ability and clear role division, appointing qualified persons as ministerial officers (Amātya), rather than just counselors (mantriṇaḥ) (Book 1 Ch. 8). Character of appointed ministers should be tested by the king and high priest by offering them temptations, but never by endangering themselves or compromising moral values. He should carefully execute this so as to not corrupt the virtuous. Just as poison spoils pure water, moral failings can taint even steadfast. Once misguided, the brave may never return to their former sanctity. Priests must also be held to high standards; any who refuse to properly teach each and everyone or perform rites should be dismissed at once (Book 1 Ch. 10). Universal access to education is considered as a king's duty, the well being and fair treatment of each individual under his reign. A true leader cares for all, ensuring each subject is treated equally and respectfully.

Justice, Punishment and Economic Ethics:

Kingship in Bhāratīya tradition is anchored in the careful balancing of discipline, justice, punishment and compassion. Ancient texts urge leaders to enforce laws wisely, administer fair punishment and actively uphold social order, always remembering that their highest duty is to serve both the people and cosmic harmony. Punishment and justice are discussed as fundamental tools for maintaining stability and fostering prosperity in the kingdom.

The king's duty is not only to deliver his own, but also to make his subjects too. And, if needed, use fear to ensure that they do so (Manu. 7.15).

तस्य सर्वाणि भूतानि स्थावराणि चराणि च ।
भयाद् भोगाय कल्पन्ते स्वधर्मात् चलन्ति च ॥

tasya sarvāṇi bhūtāni sthāvarāṇi carāṇi ca |

bhayād bhogāya kalpante svadharmātna calanti ca || (Manu. 7.15)

When people violate the set norms, they are to be punished justly. Punishment or "daṇḍa" then becomes even more essential than the dharma itself. Daṇḍa is to be considered synonymous with king or law. Daṇḍa or 'fear' is solely the only power which governs and

protects each being. But if punishment is misused, corruption sets in (Manu. 7.17, 18 & 24). There is a famous couplet part from Lañkākaṇḍ of Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa, which goes like “भय बिनु होई न प्रीति” (Bhaya binū hoi na prīti), i.e., without fear even love can not exist implying that fear or force sometimes become necessary to achieve respect, peace and cooperation also that humility should always be balanced by strength. Justice relies on proper punishment and it keeps all subjects in order also only through the fear of punishment or consequences the subjects pursue their experiences (Manu 7.22 & Śānti Parva 15.34). Punishment if meted properly prospers a king in his three aims of dharm, artha and kāma, but unfair deliverment of punishment can ruin not only the king but everyone in his realm (Manu 7.27, 28 & 29). As S L Meena rightly observes that Manusmṛti’s king's supreme authority comes from wielding daṇḍa as the fundamental instrument of governance, while dharma is the guiding ethic, it is punishment that legitimizes and enforces it. The king’s ultimate accountability is directed towards divine order rather than towards people themselves.

But here Arthaśāstra deviates from Manusmṛti. Kauṭilya says that if a king is severe in his punishments, his subjects will automatically become discontented of him and if he is very lenient he will be disrespected. Only an unbiased king is respected by his subjects. Intelligently administered punishment not only brings prosperity but happiness too among his subjects. The king should use punishment to safeguard the people of all castes and classes.

In Mahābhārata’s Śānti Parva too, Bhīṣma asserts that a ruler who administers punishment wisely ushers in an age of virtue and righteousness (Kṛta Yuga), while failure plunges the realm into decline (Kali Yuga), implying king’s pivotal role in social well-being and cosmic order (Śānti Parva Ch. 69).

प्रणिधींश्च ततः कुर्याज्जडान्धबधिराकृतीन् ।

पुंसः परीक्षितान्प्राज्ञान्क्षुत्पिपासातपक्षमान् ॥

prañidhīṃśca tataḥ kuryājjaḍāndhabadhirākṛtīn |

pūṃsaḥ parīkṣitānpṛājñānksutpipāsātapakṣamān || (Śānti Parva Ch. 69.8)

Justice is decisions that are in due accordance with law and well suited to time and place. Only pure and non covetous kings can administer justice, giving truth value in thought, speech and action. His sense organs are in firm control, for if not like a wild loose horse on a run, how can truth ever take a firm root? The wise king should act according to norms

assisted by literate, knowledgeable and faithful counsel, for how can a demented king be expected to act justly (Manu. 7.31). The king should encircle himself with learned and experienced counselors in court. He himself should investigate legal matters and address the eighteen primary lawsuit types - 1) non-payment of debt, 2) deposits, 3) selling without ownership, 4) partnership disputes, 5) non-delivery of gifts, 6) non-payment of wages, 7) breach of contract, 8) rescission of sale, 9) dispute between owners and keepers, 10) boundary conflicts, 11) assault both physical and verbal, 12) theft, 13) violence, 14) adultery, 15) duties of spouses, 16) partition of inheritance and 17) gambling and 18) betting (Manu 8.1 & 4-7). This legal framework highlights the king's role as the chief adjudicator responsible for delivering justice across a broad range of civil and criminal issues to ensure social order and fairness. When injustice overcomes justice and falsehood overpowers truth then even the members of the court suffer ruin. Justice preserves society like a sacred bull or Vṛṣa and its violation or abandoning it is like degrading gods and deemed to be vile. Justice like a true companion continues to support a person even beyond death, else everything is bound to perish with this body. Therefore it is imperative for a king to renounce justice under any circumstance (Manu. 8.14-17 & Śānti Parva 90.16). Justice is foundational support of any society and governance. Preserving a sacred duty. A king who acts unrighteously and hates his subjects, damages his own prosperity. Just rule ensures that the kingdom flourishes like a nourished mother giving milk (Śānti Parva Ch. 70).

Manusmṛti specifies varying penalties for giving false evidence based on the motive - a fine of 1,000 if motivated by greed, smaller fines if due to embarrassment or fear and larger fines if due to lust, anger, ignorance or childishness. False evidence is strictly penalised to ensure justice and prevent injustice. There are ten specific loci for punishment including the genital organ, stomach, tongue, hands, feet, eyes, nose, ears, property and body. (8.120-15). This gradation of penalty reflects nuanced judicial approach balancing motive, caste, and severity to uphold justice in society

Economic order is achieved by dividing the kingdom into four districts and villages, each categorized regarding taxes or organized for military, labour or agricultural purposes. Detailed records are kept of households, professions (like cultivators, herders, merchants, artisans, labourers, slaves, etc.), income and expenses (Arthaśāstra Book 2 Ch. 35).

Taxation is vital, with him collecting a sixth of his subjects' income to sustain defence and governance plus supplemented by confiscations from offenders. The king must appoint

trustworthy officials to manage key state assets (Śānti Parva Ch. 69). The treasury benefits from fair share of harvests and regulated fines, never putting undue burden on the people (Śānti Parva Ch. 71 & Arthaśāstra Book 1 Ch. 13). Even hermits contributed, recognizing the king as their protector. The king embodies a dual role. Both rewarding (like Indra) and punishing (like Yama), visible in his justice.

Public Welfare and Accountability:

A just ruler is defined by fairness, impartiality and a strong commitment to the welfare of each and every subject. Ancient texts urge kings to rise above bias, uphold laws thoughtfully and remain actively accountable to those they serve. This vision of kingship is human, practical and encourages rulers to foster real prosperity by treating all individuals with equality and dignity.

The king must be free of prejudice, impartial and treat all castes and communities equally (Manu. 7.35). He is expected to carefully examine various laws, ranging from provincial to guild and family codes, and its application according to the situation.

Respect is rightfully earned by people who diligently deliver their duties. Neither the king nor his officials should unnecessarily start or delay legal cases. Discovering truth is a careful process, just like tracking a deer's steps, requiring thoughtful inference and attention at each step (Manu. 8.41-44 & Śānti Parva 132.21). The king should nurture all beings without discrimination just like the earth, (Manu. 9.311), embodying universal care and responsibility, emphasizing his role as protector and reflecting fundamental principles of dhārmic kingship.

यथा सर्वाणि भूतानि धरा धारयते समम् ।
तथा सर्वाणि भूतानि बिभ्रतः पार्थिवं व्रतम् ॥

yathā sarvāṇi bhūtāni dharā dhārayate samam |
tathā sarvāṇi bhūtāni bibhrataḥ pāṛthivam vratam || (Manu. 9.311)

Following scriptural duties and acting in accordance, the king should direct all subjects and servants toward public welfare with due accountability (Manu. 9.324). Social order and prosperity is ensured by the ruler by building roads, organizing markets and maintaining public utilities for everyone's benefit (Śānti Parva Ch. 69). Vigilance is key. The king should

divide his day and night into eight equal segments and oversee security, revenue management, council meetings, leisure, self-reflection, military oversight and spiritual practice and so on in each. Personally attending important matters prevents confusion and disaffection in his subjects (Arthaśāstra Book 1 Ch. 19).

Accountability is equally essential to just rule. Scholars S. K. Sharma and V. K. Singh observed that law making in ancient India was fundamentally people centric. Even the doctrine of royal divinity did not mandate absolute obedience to the king or his laws. Citizens always retained the right to challenge, depose or even execute a king found guilty of serious wrongdoing or misgovernance.

Relevance of Rājadharmā/ Dhārmic Leadership:

Scholars like J Narayan discussed the relevance of rājadharmā as in ensuring peace and prosperity of subjects through state's impartial governance. The ancient Bharat was deeply committed to the public welfare - a principle encapsulated in the concept of yogakṣem (protection and sustenance). Though evolved through various historical timelines, the term rājadharmā fundamentally represented the duties, privileges and conduct expected of rulers as the custodians of social order. And fulfilment of these obligations was necessary for social stability and happiness. The Śānti Parva (63.25) notably states that all dharmās are merged in rājadharmā and that rājadharmā is head of all dharmās, emphasizing its supremacy -

यथा राजन्हस्तिपदे पदानि संलीयन्ते सर्वसत्त्वोद्भवानि ।

एवं धर्मान्राजधर्मेषु सर्वान्सर्वावस्थं संप्रलीनान्निबोध ॥

yathā rājanhastipade padāni saṁlīyante sarvasattvodbhavāni |

evaṁ dharmānrājadharmeṣu sarvānsarvāvasthaṁ saṁpralīnānnibodha ||

Further in Śānti Parva (Ch. 59), Bhīṣma explains at length upon Yudhiṣṭhira curiosity that how sovereignty began in kṛita age (Satyuga) when there were no kings or punishments and people lived righteously by protecting each other. But over the time when error, lust, anger and moral decline set in, it caused loss of Vedic knowledge and righteousness. Gods feared and they sought help of Brahma, creator of all. Brahma composed a vast treatise covering

virtue, profit, pleasure and emancipation, including laws, statecraft and governance. These were considered as the origins of kingship, embodied by Pṛthu, the ideal king who established order, prosperity and righteousness on earth. Pṛthu's reign was marked by protection of subjects, fair administration and ensuring social welfare. Kings, as the representatives of the divine, commanded obedience through their virtue and intelligence and their power maintains morality and justice in the world. This foundational account situates kingship as an essential factor in upholding dharma and social order, blending divine sanction with practical governance. It presents the king not just as a ruler rather the protector and nurturer of all beings, whose righteous conduct sustains the harmony and prosperity of his subjects, society and kingdom at large. Bhīṣma affirms that greatness of the king is the central subject for ethical and political discourse.

Kauṭilya emphasizes that without daṇḍa or punishment, society descends into mātsyanyāya - where the strong exploits the weak. Rājadharmā thus presents a set of universal principles of governance to subject safety, replacing anarchy by equitable justice and securing material prosperity. The maxime -

प्रजासुखे सुखं राज्ञः प्रजानां च हिते हितम् ।

Prajā sukhe sukham rajñah, prajānam ca hite hitamm.

reflects the highest ideal of rājadharmā that the king's happiness lies in the subjects' happiness. Rājadharmā's core spirit remains ensuring peace and prosperity. The state bound by these principles is never free to act arbitrarily. Rājadharmā constrains state power while directing it towards public welfare and social harmony. Aristotle, Kauṭilya's contemporary, affirmed that the state exists for the good life of its people. In modern democratic contexts, Rājadharmā's principle of 'protective discrimination', granting special privileges to marginalized sections to create an egalitarian society, remains very much relevant.

Comparative Analysis:

Manu emphasizes that the king should regulate behaviour of his subjects according to dharma, facilitated through the king in possession of ultimate authority of daṇḍa, where daṇḍa is of ultimate importance. Although dharma is important, enforcement of law and power of punishment are usual for maintaining order and governance. Whereas Arthaśāstra combines dharma with political governance suggesting dharma leads to infinite bliss. Manu's

king's responsibility towards God Almighty is greater than towards the people. Ancient Bhāratīya thought, like of Manu, emphasizes on dharma in governance, while later schools of thoughts like Arthaśāstra, sought to integrate ethical consideration with political realism. Therefore there is an interplay between ethical exhortation and reality on ground. Only a competent king can achieve this. Daṇḍa is important no doubt, but so is social welfare equally.

Every text regards kings as the upholder and protector of dharma or social order. Leadership always demands restraint, discipline and avoidance of selfishness. Welfare of people is always at centre; king's happiness is directly proportional to his subject's welfare. The ruler, divine or not, his legitimacy always comes from delivering his duties. On the other hand, while Manusmṛti focus on ritual and moral duties, including that linked to spiritual or cosmic order (ṛta) as well as practical administration, Śānti Parva, seen as later refinement, stresses on king's accountability, consultative governance and protection of weak and more democratized state notions. Arthaśāstra is the most pragmatic of all, less emphasis is given to spiritual aspects and more to competence, vigilance, surveillance and realpolitik.

All three texts agree on the necessity of wise counsel, personal discipline, cautious appointment of ministers, guiding role of priests and accountability to dharma as the foundation of legitimate governance. Whereas, Manusmṛti emphasizes norm-based, ritual-centered kingship within a cosmic framework, Śānti Parva foregrounds moral restraint, consultative governance and the ethical burdens of power and Arthaśāstra combines ethical exhortation with political realism, emphasizing competence, surveillance, welfare administration and strategic pragmatism.

Convergence reflects a shared ethical foundation, kings require capable advisers, must act justly, gather intelligence responsibly and care for all subjects. Divergence emerges in how deeply pragmatism can bend dharma, how ministers are selected and the extent of the state's social obligations. Manusmṛti anchors dharma, Śānti Parva balances dharma with emotional wisdom and Arthaśāstra balances dharma with political realism and systematic welfare where each reflects their historical and philosophical contexts while maintaining dhārmic leadership as the ultimate ideal.

Convergence reflects shared principles that punishment is necessary but must be just, impartial and graduated; justice is sacred and foundational; taxation should be fair and sustainable; and the king bears personal responsibility. Divergence emerges in how

punishment is justified (cosmic order vs. practical legitimacy), the balance between severity and mercy (daṇḍa supreme vs. balanced with dharma vs. pragmatically moderated), accountability structures (divine vs. human vs. political) and administrative sophistication.

Manusmṛti privileges divine and cosmic order through punishment, Śānti Parva balances cosmic and human welfare through dhārmic restraint and Arthaśāstra prioritizes political stability and subject welfare through intelligent, measured administration and bureaucratic systems. Together presenting a spectrum from idealistic norm setting to practical statecraft while maintaining justice as inviolable.

Convergence reflects shared commitment to universal welfare, personal royal engagement, impartial justice, infrastructure development and accountability. All three texts reject tyranny and arbitrary rule. Divergence emerges in how accountability is conceptualized (cosmic vs. moral vs. pragmatic), who holds the king accountable (divine order vs. dharma-conscience vs. subjects and elders), the sophistication of welfare administration (implicit-virtuous vs. cultivated-relational vs. systematized-bureaucratic) and the explicit recognition of popular rights to resist unjust rule.

Manusmṛti emphasizes on divine accountability and cosmic consequences, Śānti Parva balances cosmic and human moral accountability with relational welfare and Arthaśāstra prioritizes pragmatic, systematized accountability through bureaucratic mechanisms and acknowledges (via tradition) that ultimate sovereignty rests with a people capable of removing unjust rulers. Together, they sketch a trajectory from idealistic norm setting to practical political thought while maintaining public welfare and some form of accountability as non-negotiable.

Conclusion

The concept of dhārmic leadership, as articulated across the Manusmṛti, Śānti Parva and Arthaśāstra, transcends the boundaries of ancient statecraft to offer profound insights relevant to contemporary leadership ethics and societal well-being. By moving beyond the singular lens of the Bhagavad-Gītā, this comparative study reveals a sophisticated and multi-layered framework of governance rooted in the Vedic ethos of yoga-kṣema, that is protection and sustenance of all beings.

The convergence across these texts demonstrates that dhārmic leadership rests upon immutable principles, that is the necessity of wise counsel, personal discipline, impartial justice, systematic welfare administration and accountability to dharma itself. Whether articulated through Manu's cosmic order, Bhīṣma's moral restraint or Kauṭilya's pragmatic realism, all three traditions maintain that the king's legitimacy derives not from divine fiat alone, but from delivering his duties toward collective welfare and social harmony. This insight reveals that ancient Bhāratīya thought was profoundly concerned with the psychological and social dimensions of leadership, cultivating mental discipline, ethical restraint and the internalization of duty as foundations for stable governance.

The divergence found among these texts illuminates an intellectual trajectory spanning centuries, from Manusmṛti's emphasis on ritual and cosmic order, through Śānti Parva's integration of moral accountability and relational governance, to Arthaśāstra's systematic bureaucratic framework and political realism. This progression reflects not contradictions but refinements, an evolution in understanding of how dharma operates within human institutions and political constraints. Behavioral sciences today increasingly validate these ancient insights, research on leadership development, organizational ethics and social psychology confirming that authentic leadership combines moral character with practical competence, emotional intelligence with institutional structures and individual restraint with collective welfare.

Bridging ancient and modern thought, dhārmic leadership offers contemporary societies a corrective and purely utilitarian or practical models of governance. In democratic contexts, rājadharmā's principles translate into ethical governance, transparent institutions, equitable administration of law and leaders accountable to those they serve. The concept of "protective discrimination," the practice of universal education and systematic welfare administration, all advocated in these texts, prefigures modern welfare-state principles and social justice frameworks.

Ultimately, dhārmic leadership reconceptualizes power not as dominion but as stewardship; success measured not by accumulation of wealth or military conquest but by subjects' prosperity, peace and spiritual flourishing. These texts collectively assert that leadership ethics cannot be divorced from social responsibility. By recovering this Sanskrit based framework of dhārmic leadership, contemporary leaders, whether in government, organizations or communities, gain a time tested model for fostering buddhi-vikāsa

(development of wisdom) and samāja-kalyān (social welfare), ultimately advancing toward a culture where mind, ethics and society are integrated in service of collective well-being and enlightenment.

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