

Rajdharma in the Vedic Philosophy: Some Philosophical Reflections

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Abstract

In Vedic philosophy *rajdharma* or the duties and responsibilities of the ruler is aligned to *prajādharma* or the responsibility of the ruled or the people. The ultimate reality or *Brahman* is considered to be the ultimate ruler of the people and the first responsibility for the people is to understand that we all are ultimately under the rule of the divine power. It is said in the Yajurveda- '*Vayam prajāpateḥ prajā abhūm*' (YV 18.29). The present paper will examine the questions like who is the ultimate ruler, the divine power or the divine qualities in view of the central and overriding place of Dharma in polity. At the same time, it is an attempt to explore the place, functions, powers and immunities of the ruler in the Vedic philosophy and also his place as an intermediary between the heaven and the earth.

Full Paper

In the Vedic philosophy the ruler or king is not to be seen as an isolated entity with absolute power even when he possesses the latter in abundance. His whole persona is pictured in a relative form, that is, his character, duties and rights are placed somewhere between the idea of the Divine magnificence and the idea of a caretaker in the mundane sphere of social, political, and ethical practice. On the side of the Divine, we find that his character is painted in accordance with the concept of the Brahman as the ultimate ruler and protector of the universe. The ultimate reality or Brahman is conceived as the ultimate ruler of the people. '*Vayam prajāpateḥ prajā abhūm*'¹ and, on the other hand, his conduct must conform to the ideals of Dharma, his duties and responsibility towards his kingdom and towards his *prajā*. And the first responsibility for the people is to understand that we all are ultimately under the rule of the divine power. The theme of king and kingship in the ancient times, especially as depicted in the Vedic philosophy, is unavoidably attached to a conceptual bedrock created by Western and Indological scholars. It helps us to understand the different ways in which the textual meaning can be unearthed, and how the subject is open to novel and rich interpretation. But at the same time it opens the possibility of overinterpretation as well as misinterpretations. Understanding Vedic political thought in modern times is complicated by the fact that there is a rich repository of concepts and meanings both in Western as well as Indological traditions. Consequently, it makes sense to tread cautiously on these grounds. Methodologically, I see it as a necessary first step to 'bracket'² the different interpretations, not because they are of less value but because they may blur the meaning of the text through the veil of conceptualization.

There are different theories about the nature of kingship in ancient India. Hocart believes that all human communities are organised for ritual purposes and concludes that spiritual-temporal, religious-political, are one in India and the king is at the helm of the spiritual-temporal order.³ Ananda Coomaraswamy avers that king is undeniably the 'feminine' party in the 'marriage' of the Sacerdotium (*brahma*) and the Regnum (*kṣatra*), exemplified by the 'progenitive pairs' of Mitravaruṇau, Indrāgnī, or Indrabṛhaspati; Mitra, Agni, Bṛhaspati representing the divine archetypes of the spiritual authority (*brahma*) and Varuṇa and Indra those of the Regnum (*kṣatra*).⁴ There is, it seems, a precedence of the spiritual authority of the priest over the temporal authority of the king. Louis Dumont, on the other hand, argues that spiritual and temporal authority are 'absolutely distinguished' and claims that the supremacy of the spiritual was 'never expressed politically.'⁵ '...in India the king has lost his religious prerogative'⁶ and has been 'secularised' even though the political sphere remains within the religious sphere. Theodor Proferes, on the other hand, argues that the king is at the centre of the socio-political structure and ritual symbols like fire and water have been used for political consolidation and legitimacy.⁷ Jan Gonda, on the other hand, argues that the king is an 'intermediary between the powers of nature and society.'⁸ Stuart Gray, who advocates a rajanical⁹ interpretation based on the context of the Vedic milieu, says that 'ruling in the Vedic context should not be understood as anthropocentric in nature but rather deeply cosmological' entailing sacrifices and rituals and presupposing 'a deeply interconnected world.'¹⁰ While I partly agree with Jan Gonda that

king is an intermediary between the powers of nature and society, and partly endorse Gray's idea of a deeply interconnected world as depicted in the Vedic philosophy; I would like to argue that it would be misleading to start with the Western idea of monarchy with a regal political head.

In the present paper I would try to analyse and understand how the character and functions of the king are conceived in the Vedic philosophy. King is the one who rules on the earth, that is, he is the ruler in the temporal realm. However, according to the Vedic understanding the true ruler is Brāhmaṇa. Therefore, Brāhmaṇa is called *viśvādhipaḥ*¹¹ or the ruler of the universe, *Isānaḥ*¹² or the one who rules over everyone; *devānāmādhipaḥ* or the one who rules over the gods. 'Yo devānāmādhipo yasminlokāḥ adhiśṛtaḥ'¹³. It is no coincidence that the king is called a *deva* or god, e.g., king Parikṣita is called 'a god among men.'¹⁴ This is to emphasize the divine ethical qualities in the king. The word 'rājā' is derived from the root 'raj' or 'to shine'¹⁵. Similarly, the word *deva* is derived from the root 'div' with the sense of shining.¹⁶ This reflects the lustre which the presence of Brahman gives to everything. Śamkara points out, 'All this shines through His lustre.'¹⁷ It is said to be derived from the root 'rañj' or 'makes happy or delights'. This reflects Brāhmaṇa's nature of bliss.

It is interesting to see how the king is conceived to be related to his *prajā* in the Vedic philosophy. *Rgveda* speaks of *gopā-janasya* or 'herdsman of the people'¹⁸ The metaphor of *gopā-janasya* is quite revealing as it indicates the responsibility of the king towards his people, not only in giving protection but also giving direction. The Vedas see the king as the protector and it is said in the Atharvaveda, "Be this king dear to kine, herbs, and cattle." On the other hand, the *prajā* is seen to be completely dependent and directionless without him. This reinforces the Vedic idea that how the presence of a ruler can prevent a situation of anarchy. Praśnopaniṣad¹⁹ compares the ruler with the *prāṇa*. Just as the *prāṇa* divides functions among different aspects of *apāna*, *vyāna* etc, in the similar fashion the ruler divides the work among his different officers in villages, *maṇḍalas* and *janapadas*.

A king is also characterised as *dharmātmā* or the embodiment of dharma²⁰. In the *Purāṇas* there is the story of king Vena who was killed by the sages because he adopted the path of adharma and excesses, but this led to anarchy as there was no one to guide the people in the right direction. The sages then rubbed the right arm of king Vena and therefrom arose 'the majestic Pṛthu Vainya'. Thus, Pṛthu is 'placed against the dark background of tyranny and anarchy.'²¹ In the Śatpatha Brahmana king Pṛthi is referred to as 'the first of men who was installed as a king'²²Gonda says that Pṛthu appears to be the ideal king. He may be said to be the true *gopā-janasya*. Pṛthu conquered his enemies and greatly extended his empire. He protected his subjects from wounds, injuries, and diseases. In his time the earth produced grains without being cultivated, cows gave milk whenever desired, lotus-buds were filled with honey and no one remained hungry. When Pṛthu went to the sea its waves solidified, the mountains made way for him. Thus, gods, asuras, manes, sages, ascetics, ordinary men, animals, trees and mountains all declared him to be their emperor, protector, delighter, saviour. This reflects the ecological bonding of the ruler and the ruled.

The simile of the earth as daughter²³ reflects and substantiates king's duties and responsibilities towards protecting the environment and guiding his people towards that end. The king looked upon the earth as his own daughter. This shows that the ruler has the duty of taking care of the environment and of adorning it. In this sense, the metaphor of 'milking' the earth, upon her consent to be his daughter, shows a mutual respect and recognition of human beings, king being their representative, and the earth. Jan Gonda argues that there is somewhat utilitarian justification for the kingship in the sources, but kingship is not regarded merely as a human function or the king as being a public servant in the modern sense.²⁴

The epithet of *dīrghabāhu* shows the extension of the kingly power, his control over his subjects, efficacy of his law and order his ability to conquer the enemy states as well as the variety of roles accomplished by him; extension of his protection not only for his human subjects but also animals, trees, herbs, rivers, and environment. This appears to be so on the empirical plane. At the cosmic level, his long hands signify the protection of dharma, guiding his subject and his entire kingdom on the righteous path. The epithet of *mahābāhu*²⁵ is equally significant as it signifies not only protection and punishment, but also the reach of his efforts towards both empirical as well as spiritual goals. When a king is consecrated the lord of all beings and protector Brāhmaṇa and dharma

is created.²⁶ Brāhmaṇa created dharma and dharma is the ruling power of the kṣatriya- *kṣatrasya kṣatram*.²⁷ Very often gods are identified with ruling power or *kṣatra*, e.g., Varuṇa is *kṣatra*²⁸, Indra is *kṣatra*.²⁹ In Mahābhārata also we find a belief in the identity of the king with gods and divinities.³⁰ The king is said to have been created from the eternal and essential particles of Indra and seven other devas, later grouped as *lokapālas*.³¹

Very aptly, Gonda³² stresses how the king has been identified with Sun and Moon, Fire and Wind, Yama and Kubera, Varuṇa and Indra. He outshines rivals and eliminates darkness like Sun; he, like moon, is gentle; like wind he personifies freedom; his anger destroys the wrongdoer like Agni or Fire, who is also considered to be the ruler and lord of the devas.³³ Kubera signifies inexhaustible wealth: Varuṇa is the protector of dharma and *ṛta*, and metes out punishment to the evil-doer. Even an infant king has been considered a god in human form. He is identified with Indra who personifies valour, growth, vitality, and conquest. Identification with Indra is significant as it is stated in the Ṛgveda how Indra was consecrated by gods as their leader.³⁴ Santucci says, “The association of the king, Order and prosperity can best be described by recognition of the fact that the king is identified with those gods who possess the essential characters of kingship (i.e., victorious in battle and protection of the order): Indra and Varuṇa”³⁵ For instance, in Ṛgveda we find mention of king Asamāti’s *janapada* and his conquest in war.³⁶ We also find statements like, ‘O tolerant and invited Manyu, kill the enemies, give us wealth and power.’³⁷ It is ‘ however, important to note that it is the duty of the king to perform *yajña* and give charity. In Ṛgveda there is reference to the presence of sage Viśvāmitra in the *yajña* performed by king Sudāsa.³⁸ Besides there is reference to a sage going to Trasadasyu’s son Kuruśravaṇa asking for charity.

The role and functions of the king as portrayed in the Vedic philosophy, sometimes directly and mostly metaphorically, has been substantiated and concretised in the later political writings like *Arthaśāstra* and Kāmandak’s *Nitisāra*. Kautilya says the king shall never allow the people to swerve from their dharma.³⁹ If a king maintains order, he not only preserves what he already has, but also acquires new possessions, augments his wealth and power.⁴⁰ In the *Nitisāra*, the king is said to be responsible for the welfare and progress of his subjects and is venerated by the latter as *prajāpati*. We find that even here the king is being compared to and identified with gods. He is compared to Kārtikeya in power. Not only should he follow the path of dharma, he must lead his subjects on the path of righteousness. A king treading the path of dharma secures *trivarga* for himself as well as for his people. On the other hand, king who deviates from this path, has to dwell in the hell, like king Nahusa.⁴¹ There is strong emphasis on the trait of self-control⁴² in a king and this is also reflected in the epithet *rajṛṣi*, a king with the qualities of a sage.⁴³ A king not having self-control is compared, e.g., to a deer charmed by a hunter’s song, an insect charmed by a blazing flame, a bee lured and subsequently destroyed by the sweet odour. A king who does not know how to control his senses may very easily be vanquished by the enemy. Examples of kings have been cited who were destroyed by their own negative emotions. King Daṇḍaka was destroyed by his lust, Janmejaya by his anger, Dambhodbhava by his arrogance. It is important to see these texts as building essentially on the ethical foundations laid by the Vedic philosophy.

In Vedic philosophy, king or *Rājā* is not merely a mundane regal title. If we look closely there are two essential aspects in it. First it is positioned midway between the transcendental and the empirical world, second, this position must be achieved or attained with *śrama* or effort. In this sense, it is achievement-oriented. A good king is *dīrghbāhu* as his character and conduct encompasses both empirical as well as transcendental ideals and he is *mahābāhu* as his reach has to be broad enough to attain *trivarga* not only for himself, but also for his *prajā*. The ideal of dharma is personified by the ideal king, and king Pṛthu certainly exemplifies it as his righteousness has benefitted equally his human subjects and other living and non-living members of his kingdom like birds, animals, mountains, and the whole environment. Secondly, the title of the king must be achieved by those who contribute to the well-being and progress of society and nature. Thus, we find statements⁴⁴ which refer to Indra as the king as he is mighty, courageous, and conqueror of battle; Varuṇa as the king, as he is the guardian of dharma.

The notion of the ‘king’ in Vedic philosophy is significantly aspirational. While on the empirical plane, following his duties of beneficence, protection and expansion, as *dīrghabāhu*, the king’s arms must reach out to the ideal of dharma, and as *mahābāhu*, they must encompass the growth and salvation of all under his rule; on the transcendental plane, the idea of ‘king’ emerges as distinction which a person, actually designated as king, has to achieve, it is nowhere a political ‘given’. Comparison with divine neither establishes any kind of divine right theory nor means that the king himself is divine; rather it signifies that he should aspire to acquire the divine qualities to ultimately realize his true non-dual nature. No wonder king Jānaśruti Paurāyana bows down before Raikva in order to attain the knowledge of the self. Ādi Śaṅkara refers to the metaphor of the fight⁴⁵ between devas and asuras as symbolizing the self’s inner fight between the good and the evil, and eventual subjugation of the evil. While king Prthu symbolises what is good, Nahuṣa symbolises evil. The aspirational king will fight to establish the former.

Notes and References

¹ Yajurveda 18.29

² Sextus Empiricus defines *epoche* or ‘bracketing’ of thought in which there is a suspension of judgment wherein we neither affirm nor deny. This is not used to establish scepticism, rather I use it as a methodological tool in order to seek a fresh insight into the Vedic political thought.

³ A.M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study*, Routledge Revivals, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 66-67.

⁴ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, American Oriental Series, Vol. 22, ed, Z.S. Harris, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1942, p.2.

⁵ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchius: The Caste System and its Implications*, 2nd Impression, trans., Mark Sansbury, The Nature of Human Society Series, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p.72.

⁶ Op. cit., p.68.

⁷ Theodor Proferes, *Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Power* (New Haven: American Oriental Series, 2007), p.76, quoted in Gray, p. 263

⁸ Jan Gonda, “Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View, *Numen*, Jan 1956, Vol. 3, p.41. Also, James A. Santucci, “Aspects of the Nature and Functions of Vedic Kingship” *Kingship in Asia and Early America*, ed., A.L.Basham, Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, p. 93.

⁹ See Stuart Gray who argues that the ‘rajanical’ as opposed to the political better captures the core concerns of the Vedic and later tradition. *Cross-cultural Intelligibility*, p. 255.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 276.

¹¹ Śv. Up. 3.4

¹² Ibid., 3.12

¹³ Ibid., 4.13

¹⁴ Atharva-veda 20.127.7

¹⁵ *Nirukta* 2.3

¹⁶ Chh. Up. I.2.1k

¹⁷ Ka. II.2.15, in *Chhandogya Up. Śaṅkara Bhāṣya*, IV.15.4.

¹⁸ Ṛgveda 3.43.5

¹⁹ Praśnopaniṣad 3.4

²⁰ Rāmāyaṇa 1.1.29.

²¹ F.E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, London: Oxford University Press, 1922, p. 40. N.3, quoted in Jan Gonda, 1956, p.152. In Ṛgveda (10.124.8) there is reference to the failure of society in the absence of king.

²² Śatapatha Brahmaṇa 5.3.5.4; Prthu was crowned by gods and sages for the protection of the people, see Mbh. 12.59.

²³ See Jan Gonda, 1957, p. 150.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 154

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- ²⁵ Mahābhārata 5.70.9, e.g., Viṣṇu is called *mahābāhu*.
- ²⁶ Ait. Br. 8.17.6
- ²⁷ Br. Up. 1.4.11 ff.
- ²⁸ Śat. Br. 4.1.4.1; Kauṣ. Br. 7.10
- ²⁹ Śat. Br. 2.5.2; Kauṣ. Br. 12.8
- ³⁰ Mbh. 3.185.26ff, e.g., he is Śakra or Indra, Śukra, Dhātā, Bṛhaspati etc.
- ³¹ Manu. 7.4ff
- ³² See Jan Gonda, 1956, pp.61 ff
- ³³ Ṛgveda 3.10.1
- ³⁴ Ibid., 1.131.1
- ³⁵ James A. Santucci, “Aspects of the Nature and Functions of Vedic Kingship” *Kingship in Asia and Early America*, ed., A.L.Basham, Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, p. 94.
- ³⁶ Ṛgveda 10.60.3
- ³⁷ Ibid., 10.84.2
- ³⁸ Ibid., 3.53.17
- ³⁹ Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra 1.3.14-17
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.4.3.
- ⁴¹ Kāmandakiya Nitisāra 1.13
- ⁴² Ibid., 1.20-25, 1.35-36, 1.38-43; also, 1.56-57, 1.62-65, 1.68. See also, Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra 1.6.4, 1.6.5-10.
- ⁴³ See Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra 1.7.1-8; Vāyu Purāṇa 61.87
- ⁴⁴ See above.
- ⁴⁵ Ch. Up. Śaṅkara Bhāṣya 11.2.1. ‘*Devāsurā ha vai yatra saṃyetir ubhaye prājāpatyāstadha....*’