

Wisdom of the Past: Exploring Political Governance and Administration in Ancient India through Shantiparava and Sukra Niti Sara

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How to cite this article: Sayantan Saha, Sahera Khatun (2023). LIBWisdom of the Past: Exploring Political Governance and Administration in Ancient India through Shantiparava and Sukra Niti Sara. *Library Progress International*, 43(2), 2009-2018

Abstract

The political and administrative systems of ancient India, expressed in important texts such as the Shantiparava of the Mahabharata and Sukra Niti Sara, are premised on the weaving together of ethics, statecraft and social welfare. This study seeks to examine the philosophical and pragmatic bases of these models of governance, exploring the means by which rulers, ministers, and officials were to engage in governance framed around moral rectitude and justice for the welfare of the realm. The roles and responsibilities of various administrative posts, their ethical guidelines, and the emphasis on merit-based selection and rotation are highlighted in the research through a close reading of these texts. The research uses comparative textual analysis by leveraging the Shantiparava and the Sukra Niti Sara, searching in both for themes regarding political leadership, governance structure, and societal well-being and then evaluating their relevance by finding patterns converging with modern political doctrines. The paper additionally examines how these ancestral systems harmonise with contemporary governance values like accountability, transparency and respect for the rule of law. The overall implication of such research concerns the long-lasting impact of India's ancient political philosophy on contemporary governance systems and what lessons can be taken for ethical leadership and effectiveness in administration. Re-examining these ancient tomes, the present study seeks to highlight the advanced political philosophy that defined the ancient Indian state.

Keywords: Ancient India, Political System, Administration, Shantiparava, Sukra Niti, Governance

Introduction

Ancient India was known for its political and administrative systems that were governed by both a deep sense of ethics and structured governance, which have been admired since then. These systems were not simply meant to preserve state integrity but were based on a moral foundation that prioritised the welfare of the people. Out of the many references on governance, the Shantiparava, a section of the Mahabharata, and Sukra Niti Sara, credited to sage Sukracharya, are probably the most recognised texts. Both these works give detailed records of the administrative duties of the rulers, ministers, and other officers, and they both present an ideal of governance that balanced ethical leadership with practical governance. The Shantiparava, known as the “Book of Peace”, is a section of the Mahabharata, one of the two main epics of ancient Indian literature. The king must govern according to them, and in

this way, his will becomes Dharma. It highlights the connection between the moral life of the king and the prosperity and well-being of the kingdom (Mahabharata, Shantiparava, 12.10). The king is depicted as the protector of not only the land but also the moral and ethical order. The title of the treatise informs the reader that the primary role of the king is not simply that of a military leader but rather to serve as a harbinger of righteousness, ensuring justice is upheld in both domestic and foreign matters.

A more detailed manual of the mechanics of governance is the Sukra Niti Sara written by Sukracharya, which offers several insights into the roles of different administrative officers. This treatise transcends philosophical reflections on leadership; it provides an administrative framework that interweaves ethics with statecraft. Sukra based his text on principles by which various political and administrative posts could be classified, outlining the various responsibilities, qualifications and moral guidelines of different positions. The treatise argues that the welfare of the state is conditional upon appointing people based on their merit and rotating them to minimise corruption (Sukra Niti, Chapter 1).

Run deep in both are ethical systems of governance, and it's not just a king to whom the sword is handed but a moral leader with a duty to serve the best interests of those whom he governs. The Sukra Niti Sara and Shantiparava are indicative of a political system wherein the king and his officials operate in accordance with moral law and justice to uphold fairness and distribute resources. These principles and practices set the stage for contemporary governance and offered a model of ethical leadership and efficiency that would inform subsequent political systems centred around accountability, transparency, and the common good.

The Ethics of Governance

Both the Shantiparava and Sukra Niti Sara highlight that governance was regarded as dharma in ancient India. As the protector of dharma (righteousness), it was the king's responsibility to guarantee that justice, equity and fairness were maintained throughout his kingdom, as described in the Shantiparava. A king's rule should be based on dharma, not just military strength or political power (asharma). As the text succinctly states — without dharma a powerful king cannot even keep a kingdom stable (Mahabharata, Shantiparava, 12.17). The king's role was to establish a moral order, one that brought prosperity — both material and spiritual — to the people.

Sukracharya goes on further in Sukra Niti Sara to explain how rulers should regulate an ethically driven administration. Sukra reminds us that the moral character of the king is of utmost importance, for he has to be responsible not only for the direct subjects but for the whole state. These parameters would govern the decision-making process of the king, and it would affect all aspects of administration — taxation, administration of justice, etc. — that must be fair and transparent (Sukra Niti, Chapter 2). It argues also that meritocracy in governance and administration, where people are chosen based on their skills and value system as opposed to nepotism or patronage, is essential.

Structure of Administration: Posts and Their Responsibilities

It is the Sukra Niti Sara that explains how the administrative system should be structured in the state. We must be careful about taking pride in our sukra, which categorises different sukra (roles and positions) and matches them with multiple responsibilities, all of which must be rotated and held accountable against theft or negligence (errors). As their various sukra are

revolving door systems, they are kind of the worst outlaws; if they don't get succo, they will rob the underclass. Once freed from the shackles of the rotating wheel of justice, their different sukra. The following roles are critical for the functioning of the state:

The King (Raja): The king is the most important person. He is not just the political leader of the state but the moral leader of the state. The first duty of the king is to dispense justice, protect his nation, and uphold dharma. His kingship matters for the prosperity of the state, and the wellbeing of the people is determined ultimately by how he rules (Sukra Niti, Chap 1).

Amatya: Ministers are the kings' primary advisers who help the king to rule and advise him on warfare and diplomacy. They are selected for their wisdom, moral standing, and ability. Ministers, on the other hand, are used to implementing policies that are in the interest of the welfare of the people and to counselling the king on statecraft (Sukra Niti, Chapter 1).

Minister for Finance (Koshadhyaksha): Managing state finances. The treasurer collects taxes, oversees state revenues, and makes sure that resources are allocated efficiently. Besides, this official should also be financially transparent and accountable so that he is not corrupt (Sukra Niti, Chapter 2).

Judges and Magistrates These people are responsible for ensuring that justice is administered fairly. They settle disputes, uphold the law and make sure that the principles of equity and fairness are preserved in all matters of law. Judges are supposed to be known for both law and dharma, serving as impartial adjudicators in every case (Mahabharata, Shantiparava, 12.19).

Local Officers and Collectors: These officials oversee the everyday functioning of villages and smaller administrative units. They also are responsible for executing the king's wishes at the grassroots level and for making sure concerns from the people are dealt with in an effective and fair manner. Just like all officials, they are expected to maintain brood (morality) and be accountable to both the king and the people (Sukra Niti, Chapter 3).

The ideas contained in the Shantiparava and Sukra Niti Sara are astonishingly relevant to 21st-century governance systems. Ethical leadership, merit-based appointments, accountability, and the importance of social welfare highlighted in these ancient works presage numerous values that inform today's democratic systems. The ideas set forth in these texts resonate in the modern concepts of the rule of law, transparency, and public welfare. Its emphasis on moral leadership and accountability in governance is very relevant in the context of contemporary political systems, where these principles continue to shape fair and efficient administrations.

Furthermore, the distribution of power and the necessity of rotating and scrutinising officials, elucidated in these ancient texts, harmonise with the contemporary principles of checks and balances and separation of powers. These frameworks make sure no one official or institution holds too much authority, providing a means to remain a balanced and responsible governing body.

Their range from general ideas to practical functions of governance on lines of concept in Shantiparava and practical ideas in Sukra Niti Sara provides holistic and comprehensive governance on lines of watch and ethical governance on lines of exercise. These texts bear timeless teachings on governance, ethics and the principle of guaranteeing the well-being of the governed. The ancient Indian models of governance focused on justice, ethics, and

accountability continue to be timeless, providing the Indian polity and administration with important ideas and inspiration. Reading these texts, we comprehend better the ideas that have influenced political philosophy over the centuries.

This paper heavily depends on two important original text contextual analyses of those two texts, which are discussed below.

Santiparava:

The Shantiparava (or "Book of Peace") is one of the eighteen sections of the Mahabharata, traditionally attributed to Vyasa, who compiled the epic between 400 BCE and 400 CE. This section focuses on the moral and ethical duties of rulers, particularly through Bhishma's teachings to Yudhishtira. This section emphasises rajdharma (duty of kingship), where the king's responsibility is to uphold dharma (righteousness) and ensure the well-being of his kingdom. The Shantiparava teaches that a king's legitimacy stems from his adherence to moral principles, and it emphasises the connection between the king's personal qualities and the prosperity of the state.

Key Concepts:

Rajdharma: The king's duty to maintain justice and moral order.

Dharma: The moral law that governs the behaviour of both individuals and the state.

Moral leadership: The idea that the moral conduct of a king directly affects the prosperity of the state.

Shukra Niti Sar:

The Shukra Niti Sar, written by Shukracharya, is a treatise on governance, written between the 4th and 2nd centuries. A revered sage, Shukracharya emphasises competence and ethical leadership in state affairs. The treatise outlines the roles and duties of various officials, arguing for the rotation of officials to prevent corruption and ensure efficient governance. Unlike the Vedic texts, the treatise offers practical advice on justice, military strategy, and public welfare administration, all of which are based on religion.

Key ideas:

Qualification: Officials should be selected on the basis of competence and ethics.

Rotation of officials: Prevents corruption and maintains accountability.

Ethical leadership: Rulers and administrators should uphold justice and righteousness.

Literature Review

In ancient India, the political and administrative system as portrayed in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata and the Sukra Niti Sara also emphasised principles like ethics behind governance. In the Shanti Parva, the teachings of Bhishma pertain to Rajadharma (duties of the king) and Dandniti (punishment system), which are targets towards the moral responsibilities of the king. According to Bhishma, the sovereign must establish justice and maintain social harmony by protecting the welfare of the kingdom and following Dharma (righteousness) (Pareek, 2015). Bhishma's political counsel emphasises that the authority of the king (or government) is established by God, and therefore his governance should be based on principles of morality (Pareek, 2015). Besides this, the Shanti Parva is associated with an idea of diplomatic statecraft that asks rulers to act wisely towards their alliances, conduct of war and the administration of justice (Garg, 2004). This paper conforms to modern precepts of good governance (as proffered by the likes of the World Bank) that emphasise transparency, accountability and people-centric governance (Nath, 2019).

Also attributed to Sukracharya is the Sukra Niti Sara, which describes government types, minister descriptors & state administration ethics. According to Sukra, a principal condition for the proper running of a state is the appointment of persons selected on the basis of ability, the rotation of officials and the hierarchical system of state functions (Sarkar, 1914). Another striking feature of Sukra's account in this regard is that, unlike the Vedic texts, he is highly aware of the need for the moral integrity of its leadership, enjoining that a true system of governance will be evaluated according to whether its function is just and compassionate. The treatise focuses on the state machinery, describing the functions of different officials and how they lead to the preservation of harmony among the society (Sarkar, 1914). In addition to a theoretical account of the 3 branches of government, this book gives practical advice on how to hold onto public welfare, military dominance and economic prosperity. The Shanti Parva and Sukra Niti Sara represent an overarching ancient Indian system of governance that synergistically engages ethical principles and practical tenets. What emerges from these texts is a vision of a welfare state where the primary political responsibility of the ruler is the protection of the citizen (through moral leadership), a concept that is central to Indian political philosophy (Deodhar, 2021; Wani, 2017).

The ancient texts offer deep insights, but a research gap remains on how the ancient models of governance can shape contemporary political systems, particularly in relation to social justice, accountability, and ethical leadership. There have not been many comparative studies of ancient and modern forms of governance, and that is a gap that possibly academics can explore. Interdisciplinary approaches, especially combinations of political philosophy, administrative studies, and legal systems, may enrich these April Fool's Webs in how the ancient works such as Dharma and Rajadharma could be accommodated in modern globally placed political architecture (Nath, 2019; Garg, 2004).

Methodology

Drawing from ancient Indian texts like the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata and the Sukra Niti Sara, this study examines the political and administrative principles therein in order to determine their relevance to modern forms of governance. Considering that this study is entirely based on secondary sources and no fieldwork is conducted (i.e., surveys or fieldwork), the methodology consists of a qualitative analysis of existing literature, with a combination of textual analysis, comparative analysis, and historical interpretation.

Textual Analysis

The main methodological strategy is the close reading and interpretation of crucial ancient Indian texts, especially the Shanti Parva and Sukra Niti Sara. We will conduct a study of the portions of these scriptures that deal with statecraft, justice, and kingship and derive the fundamental ideas related to polity, moral law (Dharma), and the order of society. We will be able to compare the verse structure and the key themes in both the Shanti Parva and the Sukra Niti Sara to gain an understanding of the underlying principles that Bhishma and Sukracharya were explaining.

Comparative Analysis

The second major methodological approach is comparison. Additional comparisons of the governance models presented in these texts to contemporary political theories of welfare states and ethical leadership and accountability are made in this research. As an illustration,

the study benchmarks the Rajadharma (royal duties) enunciated in the Shanti Parva against the modern-day concepts of rule of law and good governance as have been laid down by international institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations (Nath 2019). This study attempts to study continuity and relevance by comparing ancient Indian political thought with contemporary theories.

Historical and Contextual Approach

Apart from textual and comparative analysis, this study employs historical interpretation to contextualise the political ideas contained in these texts within the larger framework of ancient Indian society and governance. The study is entirely based on the historic evolution of Indian political thought (Garg 2004; Sarkar 1914; Pareek 2015). Understanding the socio-political context in which these texts were written provides insight into their relevance in the history of ancient Indian governance. That perspective also places these ancient ideas in a much more human context and is a good guide as to how they might apply in today's world.

Secondary Source Review

Because this research relies only on secondary sources, the study will utilise academic books and journal articles and translations of primary texts extensively. The major works that would be critically evaluated include Sarkar's (1914) translation of the Sukra Niti Sara, Pareek's (2015) work on the Rajadharmanushasana in the Shanti Parva, Garg's analysis of political ideas in the Shanti Parva (Garg, 2004), and Deodhar's work on economic and political philosophy in the Sukra Niti Sara (Deodhar, 2021). It will further be imperative to connect the political models with ideas of good governance and legal systems in use in public administration today in India, as discussed in relevant literature.

Thematic Analysis

This will also involve a thematic analysis of some core political ideas that arise from the Shanti Parva and the Sukra Niti Sara, things such as justice, morality in leadership, the role of ministers, and public welfare. To this end, the aim is to distil themes that are, directly speaking, relevant to contemporary political discourse, especially in the context of social justice, accountability in governance and administrative ethics. Through such a synthesis of these themes, this research will provide an exploratory lens for ancient political thought to inform contemporary discussions of leadership, models of governance and public policy.

Limitations

In the reliance on secondary sources, this study is limited by the availability and quality of translated texts and scholarly interpretations of ancient Indian political thought as late as early October 2023. Moreover, as no primary data (such as surveys or interviews) is collected, the conclusions are subject to the biases or interpretative frameworks of those scholars whose research is being analysed. Yet, by emphasising important, widely recognised texts and authors, the study neutralises these biases and ensures that the interpretations arrived at are grounded in scholarly consensus.

The current research methodology aims at a holistic, qualitative analysis of ancient Indian political thought, interspersing the Shanti Parva and the Sukra Niti Sara with contemporary governance narratives. The study attempts to demonstrate through textual analysis, comparative analysis and historical context how ancient Indian governance ideas hold relevance in contemporary political systems, especially in the domains of ethical leadership and justice.

Findings and Discussion

The ancient institution of political governance and administration of the system of ancient India, a study on the Shantiparava that is mentioned in the Mahabharata and the Sukra Niti Sara. The main focus is to understand ancient Indian literature, such as epics, scriptures, etc., and its role in blending ethics, justice and governance in the service of the state. This research sheds light on how these ancient models continue to shape our understanding of governance by juxtaposing them with modern principles such as accountability, transparency, and the rule of law.

In ancient India, the main sources of political/sociological power were the following-

Dharma has been at the heart of rule and governance, and both the Shantiparava and the Sukra Niti Sara recognise this. As the Mahabharata explains, the king should be a moral leader, and his legitimacy is based on following Dharma. (Mahabharata, Shantiparava, 12.10). The teachings of Bhishma, around which this text is built, state that the virtue of the king directly determines the welfare and harmony of the state (Pareek, 2015). The king represents both the land and the moral order, upholding justice and fairness within the kingdom as well as towards foreign powers. Of the king, even with all his power, if the king governor be destitute of virtue, the kingdom cannot be long preserved. (Mahabharata, Shantiparava, 12.17)

In the Sukra Niti Sara, Sukracharya builds on this concept further by elaborating rules of moral leadership that are essential to the overall well-behaved state. It is also the king's duty to make decisions based on justice and wisdom, especially when it comes to taxation, justice and people's welfare (Sukra Niti, Chapter 2). The king's personal morality as the basis for ruling is also vital in his performance of state functions, as his actions resonate across the state, impacting all his subjects and even society as a whole. Sukra Niti Sara declares that righteous principles are necessary for governance: without principles, there can be no governance, and therefore justice, honesty and morality are the essence of governance from the point of view of the well-being of the state (Sarkar, 1914).

Administrative Structure and Roles

The Shantiparava and the Sukra Niti Sara are two ancient texts that focus on statecraft and include an extensive breakdown of different administrative roles, which highlights the need for accountability and merit in governance. Sukracharya's treatise classifies various posts from the king to the local officers and prescribes their work, qualifications and standards of conduct. These are merit-based roles, and their success is dependent on the morality and ability of the people in these jobs.

King: The king is the ultimate authority in governance. His political and moral role is to keep justice and to protect his subjects as well as to uphold Dharma (Sukra Niti, Chapter 1). In the scheme of things, the king's integrity is pivotal for the progress of the kingdom because his ethical practices have a direct impact on the lord and people of the society (Sukra Niti, Chapter 1).

Ministers (Amatya): Just like the king, the ministers also play an important role as they help the king with governance, military strategy and diplomacy. They are selected for their wisdom, moral character and competence, rather than what family they are connected to or how much someone likes them (Sukra Niti, chapter 1). They are supposed to counsel the king on state matters and ensure that people-oriented policies are properly implemented.

Koshadhyaksha (Treasurer): The treasurer is in charge of all state financial concerns, like tax collection and distribution of resources. The treasurer is responsible for revealing and being held accountable for this position, and in this role, mismanagement or misappropriation of state resources can lead to state instability (Sukra Niti, Chapter 2).

Judges and Magistrates — These individuals oversee the fair application of the law by resolving disputes and ensuring equal justice. Judges should be impartial, and they should be experts in law and Dharma and bring fairness to all matters of the law (Mahabharata, Shantiparava, 12.19).

Local officers and collectors: These handle the on-the-ground administration of the villages and smaller units, executing the policies of the king. Just like all other officials, they should hold to ethical values and be accountable to both the king and the people (Sukra Niti, Chapter 3).

These ancient scriptures depict a governance structure, reminiscent of the ethical political principles we observe today, emphasising integrity, accountability, and justice in leadership. It reads effortlessly in line with a merit-based appointment, transparent disclosure and social welfare ideals that we would now call good governance and democratic accountability. These ancient texts demand a political system in which rulers and bureaucrats must be held accountable, not merely to the state, but to the residents governed by the state, which in turn means that political action must be carried out in a fair and moral fashion.

Similarly, this follows from modern principles of civil service reforms and the significance of professionalism in government institutions, which doesn't differ from the notion of meritocracy in the selection of officials mentioned in Sukra Niti Sara. Their theme of accountability and responsibility for actions and decisions, which is a major point in both texts, agrees with current ideals such as rule of law, transparency, and public interest. These principles proved to be some of the most relevant universal equivalents of governance since then, still referred to by international organisations like the World Bank and the United Nations and being part of global organisations frameworks (Nath, 2019).

Additionally, the idea of checks and balances and the rotation of officials as solutions to the problem of centralised power mentioned in both the Shantiparava and the Sukra Niti Sara suggest principles of modern governance that avoid bestowing unrestrained power in one person or one institution. These practices encourage accountability and transparency, the bedrock of stability in modern democratic systems (Garg, 2004).

Governance for Social Welfare

Both the Shantiparava and the Sukra Niti Sara stress that the ultimate goal of governance should be the welfare and prosperity of the people. The texts highlight that the king's responsibility goes beyond military leadership and involves ensuring the well-being of the population through fair distribution of resources, justice, and social harmony (Pareek, 2015). The welfare state model proposed in these ancient texts advocates for policies that promote not only material but also spiritual prosperity, ensuring a balanced approach to governance that values both the economic and ethical dimensions of governance (Deodhar, 2021). The political systems outlined in the Shantiparava and the Sukra Niti Sara offer a profound understanding of governance based on ethical leadership, justice, and accountability. These ancient models continue to resonate with contemporary governance systems, offering

valuable lessons on the role of moral integrity in leadership and the importance of a just and ethical administration. By revisiting these texts, modern political systems can draw on the timeless principles of governance that prioritize the welfare of the people, social justice, and administrative effectiveness.

Applying Ancient Indian Governance Principles to Contemporary India

The ethical and administrative principles derived from the *Shantiparava* and *Sukra Niti Sara* continue to provide valuable insights into modern governance, particularly within India. The central tenet of *Dharma* (moral law), emphasized in both texts, resonates with India's constitutional values, which prioritize justice, equity, and social welfare. The role of the king, portrayed as a protector of both the land and moral order, finds echoes in India's political leadership today. Elected officials, such as the Prime Minister, are seen as protectors of the nation's welfare. For instance, initiatives like the *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana* (PMJDY), which aims to provide financial inclusion to underprivileged communities, align with the ancient ideal of rulers ensuring both material and spiritual prosperity for their people. The ethical leadership depicted in these ancient texts underscores the responsibility of modern leaders to uphold social justice and prioritize public welfare in governance (Pareek, 2015).

Additionally, the focus on meritocracy in the selection of officials, as outlined in the *Sukra Niti Sara*, is evident in India's civil services recruitment process. By emphasizing transparent, competitive exams, the process ensures that officials are selected based on competence rather than favoritism, aligning with the ethical governance principles advocated by the ancient texts (Sarkar, 1914).

Moreover, the emphasis on accountability and transparency in ancient governance finds a modern parallel in initiatives like the *Right to Information Act* (RTI). This empowers citizens to seek information from public authorities, ensuring that governance remains transparent and accountable. The ancient practice of rotating officials and preventing the concentration of power is especially relevant in today's political landscape, where the importance of checks and balances is ingrained in India's democratic framework. The *Judicial Accountability Bill* and the establishment of independent institutions like the *Lokpal* (ombudsman) aim to curb corruption, reflecting the ancient practices of judicial and administrative checks to maintain fairness and justice (Garg, 2004).

These modern applications of ancient governance principles not only highlight their continued relevance but also demonstrate how they inform contemporary political reforms, fostering a more transparent and accountable system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the political governance and administrative systems discussed in the *Shantiparava* and *Sukra Niti Sara* provide a timeless foundation for ethical leadership, justice, and accountability. Principles such as the importance of *Dharma*, meritocracy, and social welfare remain integral to India's political systems today. The adaptation of these ancient ideals into modern frameworks—such as civil services recruitment, RTI, and judicial accountability—reflects the ongoing relevance of these texts in shaping fair, transparent, and effective governance. By revisiting these principles, we not only gain a deeper understanding of ancient political thought but also establish a strong framework for ensuring ethical

leadership and governance in modern India. The study of these ancient texts offers guidance on integrating traditional wisdom into the evolving landscape of governance, ensuring a balance between moral integrity and practical efficiency in shaping the future of India's democracy.

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