

## Political Morality in Indian Knowledge System: With reference to Shanti Parva

Dr. Rajni Choudhary<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) provides a diverse and native basis for grasping political ethics, administration, and moral leadership. Within classical Indian literature, the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata holds a significant role in expressing the ethical basis of political power. Created in the wake of the catastrophic Kurukshetra war, the Shanti Parva offers a contemplative and prescriptive discussion on rajadharma (ruler's responsibilities), justice, authority, duty, and ethical accountability. The teachings of Bhishma to King Yudhishtira highlight that political authority should be directed by moral limitations, kindness, and commitment to dharma. This study explores the idea of political ethics within the Indian Knowledge System, particularly focusing on the Shanti Parva. It examines how ethical principles like truth (satya), justice (nyaya), duty (dharma), public welfare (lokasangraha), and self-discipline are depicted as vital characteristics of exemplary leadership. In contrast to strictly legalistic or power-focused political models, the Shanti Parva combines ethics, spirituality, and governance, thus providing a comprehensive perspective on political existence. The research employs a qualitative and textual methodology, utilizing chosen narratives and doctrinal dialogues from the Shanti Parva to underscore its significance in modern discussions regarding political ethics, leadership challenges, and moral decay in governance. The study said that the Shanti Parva offers a different normative framework that contests contemporary ideas of politics that are separated from ethics. Through re-examining this foundational text, the research adds to the current discussion on decolonizing political thought and restoring indigenous viewpoints in Political Science. To conclude, the Shanti Parva serves as an important resource in the Indian Knowledge System for grasping political morality, providing enduring insights into ethical leadership that continue to hold significance in today's democratic environment.

**Keywords:** *Indian Knowledge Framework; Political Ethics; Shanti Parva; Ruler's Duty; Moral Governance; Indian Political Philosophy*

Political ethics plays a crucial role in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), perceiving politics not merely as power relations but as a moral obligation governed by dharma. Classical Indian political thought refutes the separation of ethics from governance, emphasizing that moral conduct, justice, and the welfare of society provide legitimacy to political authority. The leader is viewed as a guardian of the public good, whose primary duty

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Sabarmati University, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Ahmaedabad, Gujarat 380058, Email ID-rajni.chy1979@gmail.com

\*Corresponding Author

**Received: March 01, 2026; Revision Received: March 20, 2026; Accepted: March 22, 2026**

## Political Morality in Indian Knowledge System: With reference to Shanti Parva

is to ensure the safety and happiness of the people (praja-sukha), rather than personal gain or family inheritance.

The Mahabharata, an essential text of Indian intellectual heritage, provides a thorough exploration of political ethics through its philosophical, moral, and educational narratives. Among its eighteen parvas, the Santi Parva stands out as a significant text in Indian political thought. Established following the catastrophic Kuruksetra battle, the Santi Parva showcases a continuous dialogue between Bhishma and Yudhisthira, focusing on rajadharma—the moral duties of a king. This post-war context inspires a dialogue rich in ethical reflection, addressing matters of justice, authority, accountability, and the moral limits of political power.

The Santi Parva describes a moral framework in which leadership is intertwined with empathy, discipline, and accountability. It emphasizes that political power must operate within the boundaries of dharma, and that deviating from moral principles leads to societal disorder and suffering. Equity, the welfare of individuals, protection of the needy, and dedication to truthfulness are presented as essential traits of outstanding leadership. Scholars note that the Mahabharata offers a distinctly Indian viewpoint on political ethics, highlighting that ethical considerations are more important than legal or institutional structures and that the ruler's personal integrity greatly influences the moral health of the state.

By closely analyzing the Santi Parva, the research seeks to explore political ethics within the Indian Knowledge System. The research aims to illustrate the continued significance of classical Indian political thought in contemporary discussions about moral leadership, governance challenges, and ethical responsibility in public affairs by analyzing its concepts of rajadharma, justice, and ethical governance.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of political ethics in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has produced an extensive range of interdisciplinary research that includes political theory, philosophy, ethics, history, and religious studies. In contrast to numerous contemporary political traditions that view politics as a separate domain, traditional Indian philosophy consistently combines ethics with administration. Academics largely concur that in the Indian tradition, political authority is ethically influenced and governed by dharma, acting as the normative basis for governance, justice, and social order.

#### Political Ethics in the Indian Knowledge Framework

Early thinkers like Radhakumud Mukherjee and Binay Kumar Sarkar highlighted that the Indian understanding of the state is essentially moral at its core. Mukherjee contended that ancient Indian political philosophy perceived the state not just as a tool of authority but as a moral entity dedicated to lokasaṅgraha (the well-being of the populace). In a similar vein, Sarkar emphasized that Indian political thought values ethical limitations, social cohesion, and the common good more than territorial growth or control.

Modern research within the IKS framework strengthens the notion that dharma extends beyond religious teachings, embodying a holistic ethical and social principle that regulates political life. Political ethics thus stands as an essential aspect of Indian governance traditions, where leaders are obligated by moral duties to guarantee justice, safety, and prosperity for their people.

## **Political Morality in Indian Knowledge System: With reference to Shanti Parva**

### **Political Thought in the Mahabharata**

The Mahabharata has been thoroughly studied as a key text in Indian political and moral philosophy. Academics like Alf Hiltebeitel have viewed the epic as a political and moral story focused on Yudhishthira's development as a dharma-raja. Hiltebeitel argues that the Mahabharata depicts politics as a realm of moral intricacy, where ethical challenges are central to the wielding of power instead of being external limitations.

Historians such as Romila Thapar and R. N. Dandekar have examined the epic as a representation of the socio-political conditions of early Indian society. Their research indicates that the Mahabharata aims to govern political power by incorporating it within ethical and social standards, thus thwarting capricious or unjust governance. These interpretations position the epic as an essential reference for comprehending indigenous political ethics.

### **Santi Parva and the Idea of Rājadharmā**

Of the eighteen parvas in the Mahabharata, the Santi Parva has garnered notable scholarly focus for its organized presentation of rajadharma (the ethical responsibilities of rulership). The conversation between Bhishma and Yudhishthira, presented following the Kuruksetra conflict, offers a contemplative structure for analyzing justice, power, leadership, and ethical responsibility.

Priyanka Pandey's in-depth examination of rajadharma in the Santi Parva highlights that the text provides concrete ethical instructions instead of theoretical moral concepts. Scholars observe that the Santi Parva portrays the ruler as a moral agent whose authority relies on compassion, self-control, and dedication to the common good. Topics like taxation, punishment, governance, and social justice are examined through a moral lens, strengthening the ethical basis of political power.

### **Ethical Leadership and Moral Governance**

Numerous researchers have established connections between the political ethics expressed in the Santi Parva and modern issues regarding ethical governance and leadership. The focus on accountability, justice, and service-driven leadership aligns with contemporary discussions on effective governance. Scholars contend that the Indian Knowledge System offers normative tools for tackling contemporary governance challenges, such as corruption, power misuse, and diminishing public trust.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of the current literature emphasizes rajadharma as a separate idea instead of placing it within the larger context of political ethics in the Indian Knowledge System. Consequently, the ethical aspects of governance outlined in the Santi Parva have not consistently been completely incorporated into modern political theory.

### **The Indian Knowledge Political Ethics and the Indian Knowledge Framework**

This System (IKS) offers a unique and holistic perspective on political ethics, in which morality, governance, and societal duty are inherently linked. In contrast to contemporary political theories that frequently distinguish between morality and politics or view ethics as an outside limitation on power, classical Indian philosophy incorporates moral values directly into the practice of political authority. In the Indian tradition, political morality is based on the idea of dharma, serving as a normative structure that guides personal behavior, social interactions, and the governance of the state.

## **Political Morality in Indian Knowledge System: With reference to Shanti Parva**

### **Dharma as the Basis of Political Ethics**

In the Indian Knowledge System, dharma extends beyond mere religious practices; it represents a universal moral framework that upholds social harmony and cosmic equilibrium. Political power is valid only to the extent that it functions within the limits of dharma. The leader is anticipated to maintain fairness, defend the vulnerable, guarantee social stability, and enhance the well-being of the populace (praja-sukha). Therefore, political morality is understood as a duty-oriented framework, prioritizing ethical responsibilities over rights or the amassing of power. Ancient Indian political philosophy consistently asserts that straying from dharma results in social chaos (adharma) and political unrest. The ruler's ethical shortcomings are viewed not as a personal issue but as a danger to the moral and social structure of the state. This perspective highlights the importance of moral leadership in maintaining political legitimacy.

### **The Ethical Essence of the State in IKS**

In the Indian Knowledge System, the state is perceived not merely as a forceful institution but as a moral body tasked with upholding justice and social balance. Classical literature depicts the leader as a steward instead of an all-powerful monarch. Governance is therefore understood as seva (service) instead of control. The perfect state serves as a protector of ethical order, making certain that political authority is wielded with moderation, empathy, and responsibility.

The ruler's ethical obligations go beyond effective administration to encompass personal moral behavior. Indian political philosophy highlights the importance of the ruler's character and self-control, asserting that the ethical nature of governance mirrors the ethical integrity of leadership. This moral individualization of authority sets Indian political ethics apart from impersonal, institutional governance models.

### **Rajadharma and Ethical Leadership**

The idea of rajadharma holds a key place in the Indian context of political ethics. Rajadharma signifies the moral responsibilities of leaders, including fairness, justice, safeguarding of citizens, equitable taxation, and commitment to honesty. Political authority is depicted as contingent and responsible, governed by moral standards rather than absolute power.

In the Indian Knowledge System, punishment and coercion are deemed acceptable only when applied within ethical boundaries. The application of force is governed by moral principles, guaranteeing that authority promotes justice instead of oppression. This regulation of political authority demonstrates a profound concern for ethical boundaries and community well-being.

### **Political Morality and Social Welfare**

A defining feature of Indian political morality is its emphasis on collective well-being (lokasaṅgraha). Governance is evaluated not by territorial expansion or military strength but by its capacity to promote social harmony and protect the vulnerable. The ruler's success is measured by the happiness and security of the people rather than personal or dynastic achievements.

This welfare-oriented conception of politics reflects the inclusive moral vision of the Indian Knowledge System, which recognizes interdependence between the ruler and the ruled. Political authority is thus relational and ethical, grounded in mutual responsibility and moral accountability.

### Relevance of IKS Political Morality in Contemporary Context

The ethical principles embedded in the Indian Knowledge System remain highly relevant in contemporary political discourse. Issues such as moral leadership, corruption, abuse of power, and governance crises highlight the limitations of value-neutral political models. The IKS approach offers a normative framework that emphasizes ethical accountability, service-oriented leadership, and moral responsibility in public life.

By foregrounding ethics as the foundation of governance, the Indian Knowledge System provides valuable insights for rethinking political morality in modern democratic and pluralistic societies. Its emphasis on *dharma*, *rajadharma*, and *lokasaṅgraha* offers enduring ethical resources for addressing contemporary challenges in political leadership and governance.

### CONCLUSION

The present study has examined the concept of political morality within the Indian Knowledge System through a focused analysis of the *Santi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. The discussion demonstrates that classical Indian political thought does not perceive politics as a value-neutral exercise of power but as a morally regulated responsibility governed by *dharma*. Political authority, within this framework, derives legitimacy not from force, lineage, or institutional dominance, but from ethical conduct, justice, and commitment to public welfare.

The analysis of the *Santi Parva* reveals that the concept of *rajadharma* constitutes the ethical core of Indian political morality. The dialogue between Bhishma and Yudhisthira articulates a comprehensive moral vision of governance in which the ruler is portrayed as a trustee of the people rather than an absolute sovereign. Justice, compassion, accountability, protection of the vulnerable, and adherence to truth emerge as essential principles of ethical rulership. Even coercive functions of the state, such as punishment and taxation, are subject to moral restraint and are justified only when oriented toward social welfare and justice.

This study further establishes that political morality in the Indian Knowledge System is inseparable from social responsibility and collective well-being (*lokasaṅgraha*). Governance is evaluated not by territorial expansion or material accumulation but by its capacity to ensure *praja-sukha* and maintain social harmony. The personal moral character of the ruler is shown to have a direct bearing on the ethical health of the polity, underscoring the Indian emphasis on moral leadership as a prerequisite for legitimate governance. In the contemporary context, marked by crises of leadership, declining public trust, and ethical challenges in governance, the normative framework offered by the Indian Knowledge System acquires renewed relevance. The ethical principles articulated in the *Santi Parva* provide valuable insights for rethinking political morality in modern democratic societies by foregrounding accountability, service-oriented leadership, and moral responsibility in public life. In conclusion, the study affirms that the *Santi Parva* represents a significant contribution to political philosophy within the Indian Knowledge System, offering an enduring ethical vision of governance that transcends historical and cultural boundaries. By reintegrating morality with politics, the Indian tradition presents a holistic framework that continues to offer meaningful guidance for ethical leadership and just governance in the contemporary.

## REFERENCES

- Bhandarkar, R. G. (1918). Vaisnavism, Saivism and minor religious systems. Calcutta: Association Press.
- Ganguli, K. M. (Trans.). (1975). *The Mahabharata: Śanti Parva*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Matilal, B. K. (2002). *The character of logic in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Mukherjee, R. K. (1957). *Ancient Indian political thought*. University of Calcutta.
- Pandey, P. (2014). *Rajdharm in the Mahabharata: With special reference to Śanti Parva*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.
- Sharma, R. K. (2013). Political ethics in the Mahabharata: A study of Santi Parva. *Indian Journal of Political Thought*, 7(2), 45–58.
- The Mahabharata. (1975). *Santi Parva* (Trans. K. M. Ganguli). New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

### ***Acknowledgments***

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** Choudhary, R. (2026) Political Morality in Indian Knowledge System: With reference to Shanti Parva. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 170-175. DIP: 18.02.1027/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/11011027