

Mahabharata's Shanti Parva and Its Learnings on Good Governance

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Abstract

Mahabharata, this rich epic of Hindus is an intricately woven tableau comprising wisdom and insights for the inheritors of this legacy. Mahabharata is not just about kingdom and regalia; rather, it enunciates the nuanced understanding of governance and serves as an impeccable guide to stewardship. The main objective of this paper is to critically examine key dimensions of governance, specifically Raj dharma, justice, the dire need for a strong ruler and the safety and security of subjects, as delineated in the Shanti Parva. This conceptual paper is based on qualitative research methods. To do so, the existing literature on this topic has been dealt with and this paper is based on theoretical interpretation of books, articles and relevant websites. Despite not having civic democracies back in those days, this research has eventually come up with some ingenious parallels between the administrative practices of those days and contemporary precepts of effective governance.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Political Thought, Justice, Mahabharata, Raj Dharma, Shanti Parva

1. Introduction

As an ancient Indian epic, Mahabharata broadens our perspective and disseminates arcane knowledge regarding a plethora of subjects, ranging from kingship governance to gender justice and equity. Mahabharata is not just about kingdom and regalia; rather, it enunciates the nuanced understanding of governance and serves as an impeccable guide to stewardship. This paper seeks to analyse the very doctrine of good governance as enunciated in the 12th Parva of Mahabharata i.e., the Shanti Parva, the most prolonged Parva of Mahabharata out of its 18 Parvas. After the fierce and ghastly combat between the Kauravas and Pandavas, finally, the vanquishing potentate, Yudhisthira sought the prudent counsel of his grand uncle Bhishma. Filled with befuddlement and mental turmoil Yudhisthira in the quest for truth sought the insightful wisdom of Bhishma who was lying on a bed of arrows waiting for his final redemption. This conversation between the perspicacious Bhishma and King Yudhisthira forms the core of Shanti Parva. This paper firstly seeks to probe into the very meaning of good governance and its next objective is to locate the interface between good governance and Shanti Parva as chronicled in this magnanimous epic.

Mahabharata is replete with instances depicting the very notion of good governance. This paper seeks to unearth those facets of efficacious governance from the Shanti Parva of Mahabharata. The task is to navigate through this timeless classic to find any equivalence between the administrative practices of those days and current paradigms of sound governance. Classical Indian statecraft is a treasure trove in itself for being the mosaic of insights. Similarly, the construct of 'good governance' is all the buzz now. So, a point of synergy would be a fascinating thing to unravel, and this paper precisely aims to do the same.

In this context, this paper seeks to analyse the very meaning of good governance and endeavours to excavate a nuanced understanding of various dimensions of good governance as contextualised within the Shanti Parva.

2. Literature Review

The following survey of existing literature first extensively deals with the timeless epic Mahabharata and then focuses on the dimensions of governance.

2.1. Mahabharata and Shanti Parva

As its name suggests, Shanti Parva chronicled the post-war scenario (Dutt, 1903). Following cessation of the blood-soaked conflict at Kurukshetra, Yudhishthira wracked with guilt condemning himself for the destruction (Dutt, 1903). His soul was pierced with the death of his sons and filled with remorse, he longed for the ultimate relinquishment. His brothers along with his wife tried to pursue him with fervor (Dutt, 1903). The venerable sage, Vyasa also offered him words of solace by expounding that everything was pre-destined (Dutt, 1903). In the throes of emotional turmoil and cognitive dissonance, Yudhishthira sought answers to his questions from astute Bhishma (Dutt, 1903). Lying in a bed of arrows, Bhishma dispensed his wisdom on a plethora of issues (Dutt, 1903). The focus of this paper has predominantly remained on the various facets of governance.

Garg (2004) in her ingenious piece of work expounded on various facets of political ideas that are embedded in Shanti Parva. For instance, the author has skilfully brought out the origin of state theory embedded in Shanti Parva (Garg, 2004). Similarly, be it on kinship, inter-state relations, government or dandaniti, the author has effectively conveyed the theoretical grounding of these aforementioned facets (Garg, 2004). This paper focused on those aspects that have a governance undertone. Khangarot (2017) has ingeniously come up with an in-depth explication of ancient scriptures like the Vedas and Upanishads and classical texts like Arthashastra, Ramayana and Mahabharata and thus it provided a significant cue for this research. However, a scholarly work single-mindedly focused on the point of convergence between Shanti Parva and governance is yet to be discerned. It is quite a daunting task to encompass

every aspect of sound administration in a single research paper. Hence, it leaves room for further scholarly discovery.

2.2. Good Governance

The covenant that bears mentioning in this context is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) document titled, “Governance for Sustainable Human Development” (1997). This aforementioned document tersely provides an overview of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘good governance’. Governance is not the sole preserve of the state; rather it houses the civil society and private sector as well (UNDP, 1997). The eight central tenets of governance namely rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness, efficiency and accountability are the linchpins of contemporary governance (UNDP, 1997).

An in-depth exploration of Weiss’ work provided nuanced governance acumen to comprehend this research paper (Weiss, 2000). Nandigama (2024) masterfully demonstrated the profundity of effective administration by outlining its various facets coupled with the primary constituents integral to it. A comprehensive set of measures has been introduced by the authority to facilitate the robust institutional framework (Nandigama, 2024). But the issue of sound management is a hard row to hoe and just like every silver lining has a cloud, there’s a downside to governance as well before it becomes potentially realizable (Nandigama, 2024). This paper helps to enhance the concision of the construct of effective governance.

3. Methodology

This paper seeks to locate the interface between governance and Shanti Parva of Mahabharata through the theoretical interpretation of texts. This is mainly a qualitative research-based paper and to do so, an in-depth content analysis of books, articles and relevant websites has been conducted. First the existing literature on this topic has been dealt with and then the theoretical interpretation has been conducted.

Concept of Good Governance

Before delving into the intricacies of this topic, first, it is pertinent to embark upon understanding the very concept of good governance at the very outset. Governance, the term which has become the latest craze denotes the art of governing or “the state of being governed” or the method of government or regulation” (Weiss, 2000, p. 795). To put it in simple words, governance is the process through which common affairs are managed and steered by public and private institutions (Weiss, 2000, p. 796). This concept of governance rose to prominence during the 1950s and 60s when the disillusionment with the state-controlled models of socio-economic development began to pervade all around (Weiss, 2000, p. 796). There is a plethora of definitions of good governance enunciated by the esteemed institutions across the globe.

Governance is a decision making procedure coupled with the mechanisms through which such decisions are executed (United Nations Social and Economic Commission for the Asia and the Pacific, n.d.). Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General expounded that good governance stands for garnering admiration for human rights, the rule of law, democracy and candor in administration (Weiss, 2000, p. 796).

A document titled “What is Good Governance” published by United Nations Social and Economic Commission for the Asia and the Pacific (n.d.) discussed eight canonical and archetypal characteristic traits of good governance. As per the document the first characteristic is participation, which denotes that every stakeholder of the government even the most vulnerable ones should have a voice in the decision-making algorithm. The second one is the rule of law or the impartial or unbiased execution of statutes and the other two significant elements are transparency and accountability, which means information, ought to be readily retrievable and disseminated amongst all the stakeholders. Further, this document noted that good governance stands for responsiveness and consensus-oriented and lastly it stands for equity and inclusiveness, which means even the most fragile and marginalized, should be provided with level playing field.

Elements of Good Governance

Following an in-depth understanding of the very fundamentals of good governance, it's time to devote oneself fully into the nuanced analysis of its intersection with the Mahabharata's Shanti Parva in greater depth. This paper seeks to feature and accentuate those segments of Shanti Parva that deal with exquisitely detailed facets of governance. Shanti Parva comprises 365 chapters and is further divided into three sub-Parvas, namely: i. Rajadharmanushasana Parva, ii. Apaddharmaanushasana Parva, iii. Mokshadharma Parva (Pareek, 2015, p. 95). This paper preponderantly seeks to explore this Rajadharmanushasana Parva to locate its symbiosis with the contemporary notion of good governance.

Rajdharma

Shanti Parva is a testament to the concept of ‘raj dharma’ which is considered to be one of the cornerstones of ancient kinship. At the very outset of this tranche of this magnanimous epic, Bhishma tendered his counsel of ‘raj dharma’ to Yudhishthira. The very first drop of the nectar of wisdom that trickled down his mouth happened to be,

Protection of the subject, O Yudhishthira, is the quintessence of duties (Dutt, 1903, p. 81).

Bhishma elucidated the significance of dharma which was revered by the Elysian and transcendent sages like Bharadvaja, Gourashira and Manu. Therefore, preservation

and defense of the subjects are considered to be of utmost importance. Then Bhisma went on to explain the prolific ways of bestowing security to the adored subjects of the king. From the deployment of spies, charitable bestowing, looking after collective well-being, acknowledging virtue to executing responsibilities promptly, watching over and tending to dilapidated houses and paramountly in pursuant to 'dharma', a king was supposed to execute all his aforementioned duties (Dutt, 1903, p. 82). The primary function of the king was to sustain "dharma" and contribute towards the welfare of his subjects (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Much like the Hobbesian Leviathan, Bhisma also vested the king with unwavering jurisdiction so much, so that he deserved complete obedience from his subjects (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). But before exercising unchallenged supremacy over his subjects, the king was expected to master the art of transcending his own emotions; in other words, self-mastery was considered to be a pre-requisite for unbridled power (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Quite akin to the contemporary policy of using gentle persuasion to facilitate comprehension, Bhisma also emphasized winning the 'hearts' of his subjects rather than using coercion (Dutt, 1903, p. 81).

'Raj Dharma' in Shanti Parva is a laconic term comprising both the political and administrative functions; quite akin to the modern notion of government (Garg, 2004, p. 82). The king being designated as the head of the government was entrusted with the task of maintaining law and order coupled with the disposition of justice which is the strategic endeavour of any government (Garg, 2004, p. 82). Ensuring the well-being of his adored subjects is of utmost importance and the king should ensure that his subjects slumber in a cocoon of security. Although the entire machinery of government is composed of three pivotal organs namely, legislature, executive and judiciary, in Shanti Parva greater importance is accorded to the executive branch of the government (Garg, 2004, p. 82). For better governance, an efficacious and adroit executive is the need of the hour (Garg, 2004, p. 82). So in Shanti Parva, it is enumerated that the ministers must be incisive and meticulous enough to actualize the goals (Garg, 2004, p. 82).

Justice and Dandaniti

In another section, Bhisma orchestrated the king to fend for the poor and deliver justice just as the "Regent of death" (Dutt, 1903, p. 80). The concept of punishment or 'dandaniti' is elaborated at a stretch to guide the king for his future course of action. In this context, Dandaniti or "the science of coercion" can also be depicted as the "science of governance" (Garg, 2004, p. 82). Just as the saying goes, rule with an iron fist or keep a tight rein, similarly in order to toe the line, the king needs to enforce dandaniti to keep things under control (Garg, 2004, p. 82). The concept of punishment is enumerated in Shanti Parva as it is one of the linchpins of good governance to

expedite justice by administering sanctions on the malefactor (Dutt, 1903, p. 84). Even Bhisma vocalized the nuanced understanding of conferring sanctions upon individuals (Dutt, 1903, p. 84). For instance, Bhisma opined that Brahmanas should be exempted from punishment, penalties must be commensurate with the crime committed and emoluments should be given to those who were in dire need and those bestowed with unparalleled excellence (Dutt, 1903, p. 85), and most importantly what he propagated by saying “punish with your own hands the man whoever he may be, who doesn’t satisfy his duty” is nothing short of the contemporary concept of the rule of law (Dutt, 1903, p. 85). This insinuates the fact that the law applies equally to everyone bereft of any kind of discrimination and regardless of one’s status. Bhisma exposted that if the “science of coercion” was not administered properly, it would lead to the obliteration of the three Vedas and utter muddling of duties of belonging to different vernas (Garg, 2004, p. 82). It is only through the execution of the ‘science of punishment’ or ‘dandaniti’ that king could uphold ‘dharma’ and disseminate the same amongst his subjects (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Shanti Parva enlightens us regarding the ultimate desiderata of life namely, “dharma, artha, kama, moksha” (Garg, 2004, p. 83). Dharma one of the fundamentals of Sanatan tradition stands for justice and optimal execution of one’s duties (Garg, 2004, p. 83). It is the apical source of everything, be it law, morality or religion (Garg, 2004, p. 83). Artha on the other hand refers to the means for garnering mundane wealth and the “purusharthas” that gratify human coveting (Garg, 2004, p. 83). Kama refers to the longings and proclivities of individuals including one’s carnal impulse (Garg, 2004, p. 83). Moksha is the denouement of one’s life and it stands for the ultimate liberation of the soul. Bhisma chronicled that the ultimate function of the king was to administer justice and dandaniti so that the people could live under the canopy of law (Garg, 2004, p. 83).

Need for a Strong Ruler

Bhisma chronicled a bedlamite condition without the overarching rule of a strong monarch very akin to the state of nature enunciated by the social contractualists like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (Dutt, 1903, p. 100). Highly analogous to the Hobbesian state of nature of war of all against all, a completely anarchical situation would be pervading all around where the strong ones under duress would plunder and despoil “the properties of the weak”, and on their denial to do so, would endanger the lives of the debilitated ones (Dutt, 1903, p.100). Only a strong sovereign ruler capable of handling such an acephalous condition would be able to restore law and order and provide protection to his subjects (Dutt, 1903). Strikingly analogous to the state of nature, in the condition prevailing before the institution of kingship, people had no idea about the notion of private property (Garg, 2004, p. 79). But with the phylogenesis of agriculture, people started establishing individual properties and developed the sense of thine and mine. Not only that then began the concept of

wresting wealth from others and the condition of utter mayhem prevailed (Garg, 2004, p. 79). Shanti Parva delineates that this propelled the necessity to establish kingship to protect the property and family of the people (Garg, 2004, p. 79). So with the establishment of monarchy, as it is chronicled in the Shanti Parva, the king became the sentinel of their “property, family and varna system” (Garg, 2004, p. 79). Varna was much kin to functional division of labour according to one’s position in this hierarchy. For instance, the performance of rites rested upon the shoulders of Brahmanas whereas the Kshatriyas were endowed with the task of protection (Dutt, 1903, p. 111).

Safety and Security of the Subjects

The safety of the women was dealt with utmost importance (Dutt, 1903). Bhisma stated that the security would be such that the women could fearlessly stroll around the streets bereft of trepidation. To maintain law and order in his kingdom, Bhisma also championed complete abstention from intoxication (Dutt, 1903, p. 114). According to Bhisma contrite individuals and flagellants warrant special concern and they must be honoured with wholesome fare (Dutt, 1903, p. 114). This is essentially equivalent to the modern concept of the welfare state where the state fends on those who cannot provide for themselves. Bhisma compiled an exhaustive catalog of thirty-six virtues that a king should cultivate to function according to the principles of dharma (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Such virtues include meticulously discharging one’s duty, not gaining wealth by resorting to malicious means, being pristine and immaculate, should not act in benightedness and so on (Pareek, 2015, p. 96).

As already stated, the protection of his subjects coupled with their safety and security should be given cardinal consideration (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Especially during the hours of travail, the king must work with a sensible approach and figure out discreet ways to help people in despondency (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Even a detailed matrix of taxation is given by Bhisma specially to raise extra revenue at times of emergency (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Similarly, for the welfare of his subjects, the king should go that extra mile, even if it means signing a treaty with the enemy (Pareek, 2015, p. 96).

Very adeptly, Bhisma chronicled the genesis of prosperity of a king in the 56th chapter of Shanti Parva. He expounded that a self-controlled and austere king, who happened to be unostentatious, ethical, equanimous, handsome and not much enquiring remained unrelentingly thriving (Roy, 1890, p. 169). He further added, that by adjudicating justice coupled with occultation of one’s weakness, identification of vulnerability of one’s enemy, by maintaining one’s “counsel close” and through decorous demeanour, a king could maintain his opulence (Pareek, 2015, p. 96). Shanti Parva lists out five different domains over which an efficacious king enjoyed complete custodianship namely, fortification, belligerence, maintenance of dharma

during administrative affairs, policy formulation and ensuring holistic care and prosperity of the subjects. Besides Mahabharata, classical Indian statecraft is replete with instances depicting the very notion of fiduciary excellence. For instance, venerable texts like Rig Veda and Yajurveda have given utmost primacy to theoretical paradigm of the welfare of the subjects (Khangarot, 2017, p. 16). Brihadaranya Upanishad underscored the duty of the ruler to uphold dharma i.e., moral rectitude, ensure the optimal well-being of his subjects and foster an equitable environment to ensure everyone has a level playing field, free from deprivation and exploitation (Khangarot, 2017, p. 16). Manusmriti articulates the principles of the rule of law and strong leadership, while Kautilya's Arthashastra stands as a seminal and masterful work on statecraft (Khangarot, 2017, p. 16). Arthashastra has delineated the seven cardinal elements of the state known as the Saptanga theory of state constitutive of the ruler, ministers, territory, capital, treasury, army and ally (Khangarot, 2017, p. 19). Kautilya's philosophy emphasizes the paramount importance of civic prosperity and sound judicial discretion, anchored in the principles of rule of law (Khangarot, 2017, p. 19). Be it Mahabharata or any of the aforementioned canonical texts of Vedic antiquarian they provide a very fascinating insight into the notion of governance and that was way ahead of its time, especially taking into consideration the paucity of representative government back then. Notwithstanding the lack of participatory governance, the ruler was accountable for the contentment of their subjects, denoting the fundamental building blocks of accountability and transparency. Even though the concept of 'inclusive administrative theory' is of recent origin, the philosophical underpinnings demonstrated applicability during the time of Mahabharata. A fastidious review of the Shanti Parva epitomizes axioms of administrative excellence that elicit a strong affinity with contemporary practices. The concept of Rajdharma is dispossessed of religious connotations; rather it details a schema for prudential management by focusing on the tasks and deliverables of the rulers. By the same token, the salience on women's safety, protection of the populace, and justice dispensation reflects effective governance. Thus the concept of human rights and protection of susceptible demographic has been reinstated in Mahabharata.

Shanti Parva Mirrors the Modern Aspects of Governance

The eight central planks of governance, namely rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness, efficiency and accountability, are the linchpins of contemporary governance (UNDP, 1997). Similarly, if one flips through the pages of the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, clearly, such principles of modern governance can be noticeably urbane. For instance, in Shanti Parva, the weal and woe of subjects have been entrusted to the king and ensuring their protection is considered as his primary function. The public who are being treated as the bigwigs in governance are bestowed with primacy, hence the very

schema of consensus orientation of modern governance goes hand in hand with this. Again, administration of justice and amassing of wealth adeptly among the subjects tantamount to the modern notion of the rule of law and optimal use of resources. Likewise, in Shanti Parva, Bhishma underscored the importance of accountability of kings because if the king is not venerated “by his own people” then he would be greeted with derision by his enemies as well (Dutt, 1903, p. 99). By the same token, the issue of responsiveness has also been inscribed implicitly as in one instance, the king has been reminded to ensure the security of his subjects with patrilineal affection.

4. Conclusion

Mahabharata is not just a grandiose epic furnishing sanctuary to a range of human emotions, but also teaches us about a plethora of issues that are of contemporary relevance. The issue of governance has become the talk of the town in recent times. But our ancestors were the chosen ones and indeed were way ahead of their times to comprehend such an issue back then. Shanti Parva is a testament to good governance and chronicled issues ranging from taxation, safety and security of subjects, emergency times, and deployment of spies to utmost maintenance of ‘dharma’. This paper has attempted to highlight this intersection between governance and Shanti Parva and thereby flung ajar a revised understanding of this epic altogether.

5. Limitations and Further Research

Although a lot of rendered adaptations of Mahabharata is seamlessly navigable across the globe, since the original one was written in Sanskrit, the original scripture becomes impenetrable to many owing to the language constraint. Many times, these translated renditions compromise with the semantic fidelity of the foundational writings. This can be considered as one of the biggest limitations of working with the aforementioned epic. Yet, there are a plethora of opportunities for further research and reconnaissance of Mahabharata. Each of its segments and Mahabharata in general remains a fertile ground for scholarly discovery. So far as this intersection between governance and Shanti Parva is concerned two articles cater partially to this topic. “Political Ideas of Shanti Parva” (2004) by Garg offers an insightful analysis of the political ideologies embedded in Shanti Parva but does not focus predominantly on the governance issue. Similarly, another written by Dr. Meenakshi Khangarot titled “Good Governance in Ancient India: An Analysis” (2017) provides an in-depth explication of ancient scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads and classical texts like Arthashastra, Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, a scholarly work single-mindedly focused on the point of convergence between Shanti Parva and governance is yet to be discerned. It is quite a daunting task to encompass every aspect of sound

administration in a single research paper. Hence, it leaves room for further scholarly discovery.

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