



Decolonizing Rashtra: Reclaiming Indian political thought from Rigveda to Arthashastra

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Abstract

This study presents a decolonized Rashtra in Indian political thought. Its main purpose is to prove that in the Indian tradition, the Rashtra is not just a geographical or political state, but a moral, spiritual and civilizational system. The Rashtra is based on righteousness, religion, welfare and Rajdharma. The colonial and Eurocentric knowledge tradition translated the Rashtra as a nation or state, which diminished its fundamental philosophical and cultural meaning. This study challenges this cognitive distortion and reconstructs the Indian concept of the Rashtra on the basis of the original texts of the Rigveda, the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata and Kautilya's Arthashastra.

This study employs Hermeneutic and qualitative methods. The study uses the ideas of Anibal Quijano's Coloniality of Power, Emmanuel Wallerstein's critique of Eurocentrism, Bhikhu Parekh, Kapil Kapoor and Rajiv Malhotra to make it clear that it is necessary to understand Indian political concepts in their indigenous context. The findings of the research show that the concept of the Indian nation is not power-centric but based on religion, morality, social responsibility, public welfare and spiritual harmony. Therefore, the decolonized Rashtra is not just a historical recall, but an attempt to restore the epistemic autonomy of Indian political thought. This study provides an alternative and fundamental intellectual perspective to Indian political theory in global discourse.

Keywords: Decolonization, dharma, hermeneutic, janapada, praja, rajdharma, Rastra, Rigveda, rta, saptang theory, Santi-Parva

Introduction

The research attempts to explain the concept of Rastra in the Indian context, as it is showed in the Rig-Veda, Mahabharata, and Arthashastra. The term "Rastra" is derived from the root word "Raj", which means, to rule. It is an ethical and cosmic project. The ruler's legitimacy is derived from supporting Dharma (righteousness, moral and cosmic order) and allowing the four Purusarthas (the aims of human life: Dharma, Artha, Karma, and Moksha). These distinctions sharply contrast with the Western idea of a mechanical state, which is defined purely by territory and sovereign power (Malhotra, 2011) ^[10].

In the Rigveda, Rashtra refers to a non-territorial term where the Rajan (king) exercises Kṣatra (power) over his Jana (tribal community). There was an ethical relationship among Rajan (king), Jana (people), and Rta (cosmic order) (Griffith R.T.H. (trans.), 1896). The king's duties were to protect the people from external attack as well as from internal chaos, uphold Rta (cosmic order), and protect and enhance the material prosperity of the subjects. In the post-Vedic era, Rastra was territorialized and compared with 'Janapada', a moral and cosmic entity. By the Arthashastra period, Rastra came to be operationalized according to the Saptanga theory by integrating moral and dharma (ShamaSastri, 1915) ^[13]. In contrast to the modern Western state, which is mechanistic and based on the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Weber. Rastra is based on moral spiritual reasoning. The Western model attempts to overlook non-Western knowledge, epistemology, to transform it into a universal concept. Post-colonization, Indian terminologies such as Rashtra Rajya, Dharma, and Rta were rejected in Western terms and considered "pre-political" or "despotic". Quijano observes that the Western

powers constructed the world categories of knowledge and power, while Wallerstein asserted that Europe's claims to knowledge became pseudo-universal (Quijano, 2007; Wallerstein, 1997) ^[2, 16]. Consequently, Rashtra was translated to "state," losing its dharmic and cosmic meanings. Rajiv Malhotra and Satyanarayana Dasam Babaji assert that some ideas are untranslatable, their sense cannot be conveyed without losing their depth as cultural and philosophical constructs. Such mistranslation caused epistemic loss (Malhotra, R. and Dasam Babaji 2020) ^[9]. Kapil Kapoor also argued that the Indian knowledge system is not a combination of secular disciplines, but one integral, cohesive system based on spiritual and philosophical worldviews. Therefore, Reclaiming Rashtra requires a hermeneutic return to its original intellectual context (Kapoor, 2005). Rajiv Malhotra describes Indian civilization is pluralistic; it integrates all kinds of differences to support diversity within a moral order and dharma without the causes of fragmentation (Malhotra, 2011) ^[10]. Parekh argues further that Indian political ideas need to be recovered in their indigenous context so that theoretical strength is restored (Parekh, 1991). Quijano's concept of coloniality of power shows how Europe's conquest of knowledge shifted into knowledge, where even terms like Rashtra were as primitive state forms (Quijano, 2007) ^[2].

This study employs a hermeneutic approach, using an original text like the Rigveda, Santi Parva, and Arthashastra to reclaim Rashtra as an indigenous perspective. Rashtra is set up to be ethical, organic, and cosmic, following Rta, Dharma, and Artha. The swamin (king) is the trustee of the welfare of people (praja-shukha), a participatory government by assemblies (sabha, samiti), financial (kosa anugraha, parihara), and management of territory (janapada,

durga). Each feature illustrates how Indian political thinking merged pragmatism with ethical accountability, in confrontation with the colonial distortion of "Oriental despotism," which means European power. Quijano's coloniality of power and Wallerstein's critique of Eurocentrism together show how Europe's conquest reached into epistemology itself, where categories such as Rastra were seen in primitive forms. therefore, to reclaim the epistemic freedom of Indian political thought Quijano,2007; Wallerstein,1997) ^[2, 16]

This study shows how India's classical texts offer an epistemic basis for political thought. Therefore, to regain the complete sense of Rashtra. We need to decolonize the term by reading it from its indigenous point of view.

Finally, the paper argues that Rastra, as defined in the Rigveda, Mahabharata, and Arthashastra, is a unique moral, cosmic entity. It is not a mechanical coercive institution of power but a dharmic order that balances Rta (cosmic truth), Dharma (moral order), and Artha (material order). Regain its indigenous identity, political categories must be decolonized by placing Rashtra within the Indian civilizational perspective, which balances ethics, spirituality, and governance. According to Anibal Quijano points out, coloniality functions not just in power but epistemologically by setting up what is knowledge (Quijano,2007) ^[2]. The decolonization of Rashtra is not a historical endeavour; it is an epistemological act of restoring India's intellectual sovereignty (jnana-svatantrya).

Conceptual Foundation of Rashtra

The concept of Rashtra, derived from Raj (to rule), is a cosmic-moral organism (dharma-purua) and not a territorial state. There is a Relationship among (king), Jana (people), and Rta (cosmic law). While Western colonialism translated Rastra into State, thus depriving it of its spiritual, ethical, and cosmic dimensions (Kapil Kapoor, 2005)

Rastra in the Rigveda referred to cosmic order, 'Rta', and the divine, based on Dharma. Rajan used his power over his Jana (tribal community). Rajan's duties were to protect the Jana and preserve rta (cosmic order) and ensure material prosperity in the Kingdom. Rastra was morally, ethically, and spiritually grounded in social harmony. Rastra was divided into dominions where was powerful and just, also protecting his people, whose authority is guided by divine order. Rastra is associated with cosmic rta or the divine created by God (Rigveda,1.16 8.9). Rastra was political but divine and cosmic in nature.

The king was not only a ruler but a protector of the People. Following the rule of law based on ethical dharmic principles. The king governed with the dharmic cosmic principles, so he was governed by moral, ethical dharmic justice. If he didn't do that so he would lose his power to rule over people or moral legitimacy. Rastra was stable, strong, based on Dharma (righteousness), justice, moral ethical (Rigveda,3.34.2). king was chosen by popular consent (samiti \vis). King's authority was derived from divine authority, but also the authority of the people. The king was able to secure legitimacy through the consent of individuals rather than only derived from divine authority. Rastra is governed by cosmic order or ethics (RigVeda,10.12 4.8).

Rastra in the Mahabharata: Rastra in Santi-parva was moral, ethical, participatory, uphold Rta or Dharma. The

king's duties were to make people happy and to safeguard them and their properties from both internal and external threats. The King keeps law and order within the state, peace and ensures the prosperity and welfare of the people. (Mahabharat, shanti parva, chapter 70). In Shantiparva, the state or kingship originated due to a semi-contractual agreement between King Prithu and Rishis (Sages) in the presence of Brahma (God). Origin of the state is based on semi-contractual theory partly Divine nature and partly Contractual. The State was created because of the necessity for peace and order in society. Rashtra is an ethical and participatory entity, based on Dharma and social well-being (lokasamgraha). The role of the king is not autocratic but fiduciary; he is Rajya pradhana sevaka (chief servant of the people). The King had to keep the peace, order, discipline, and the Dharma. (Mahabharat, book 12, chapter 56-130).

Jayaswal shows that the ancient Indian rule was "law-bound kingship," in which the Raja was governed by Dharma and following Jana (People). In the Mahabharata, the king protects his people (Jana) and promotes their happiness is the ultimate ruler, otherwise, he is a thief. The kingship was based on dharma, morally to ensure legitimacy not through coercion or force power. Therefore, Indian civilization always keep unity in diversity and to keep harmony, cooperation among various groups (varna, ashram, Jati) (Malhotra 2013).

Rashtra in the Arthashastra: The Arthashastra of Kautilya (4th century BCE), Rashtra as a functional science of state (Rajya sastra), but did not abandon its dharmic basis. The saptang Theory names Rastra as an organic body with seven elements: Svamin, Amatya, Jana pada (land & people), Durga, Kosa, Danda, Mitra (Artha sastra, Book 6, chapter 1). this shows that a Rastra was a living being like a body organ, also includes Artha, karma, dharma, moksa and ruler's duties were to make people happy (praja- shukh).

Kautilya asserts that territory is very important to protect people and kingdom, so people should be loyal, and laborious or hard working, free from calamities, easy to protect or defend and resourceful (AS, Book 13, Ch. 4). Similarly, citizens must follow civic virtue such as they have to disciplined, rich, hardworking and follower of rules(law-abiding). (AS, Book 8, Ch. 2). Rashtra's moral and material underpinnings are based on the principles of moral and materiality, connecting moral order with administrative capability.

King should be strong. intelligent, and clever, so that he could be able to protect Rajya \Rastra (people, territory), make people happy trough fulfil their necessities also make people strong so weak people could stand against the strong. so that matsyanyay condition would not be set up. (AS, Book 1, Ch. 4). Thus, Kingship is only legitimate insofar as it safeguards the well-being of subjects "In the bliss of his subjects resides the king's happiness; in their good fortune their good fortune" (AS, Chapter 1, Ch.19). Thus, sovereignty stayed an ethical system in which power is governed by justice and the good of all, challenging colonial Orientalist stereotypes of despotic Oriental despotism (Indent, 1986) ^[5].

In fiscal negotiations which means the process of discussion and bargaining over financial matters, budget, money taxes, assemblies such as the Paura-Janapadas which means entire political community, assembly of the people and territory try to control king, which might ask for anugrahas (grants)

and pariharas (reliefs) during emergencies such as calamities, recession and war. the participatory and responsible character of this Rashtra can be seen. The obligation of the king to respond to these requests of institutionalized welfare and responsibility is present (Jayaswal, K.P 1943) ^[6]. This setup provides an internal political rationale that defies Eurocentric reductionism. Western political science tends to monopolize universality at the expense of non-Western categories, as Dallmayr cautions. Parekh also criticizes such ethnocentrism, calling for the acknowledgment of different political traditions (Dallmayr, 2004; Parekh, 1992) ^[3, 12]

Jayaswal believes this is a constitutional kingship law is before a ruler. Kapil Kapoor sees it as semantic harmony of ethics and pragmatism, whereby material order (artha) never breaks away from moral order (dharma). Malhotra enhances it is civilizational: Rastra unites several spheres spiritual, material, social into a single harmonious system (purna tattva). By reaffirming Kauṭilya's synthesis of dharma, artha, and sreyaḥ (welfare), Indian political thought reasserts its independence from colonial epistemologies. The Artha sastra is therefore an instance of India's "semantic continuum," as conceived by Kapoor, wherein terms such as rta, dharma, and Rashtra form a civilizational grammar of rule ethical, participatory, and cosmic in nature instead of juridical (Kapoor, 2009) ^[8]. Therefore, Rashtra is not a coercive system, but a dharmic element between ethics and efficiency within the cosmic order of Rta.

Rajiv Malhotra focuses on the principle of Integral Unity, which resists reductionism (breaking whole into parts), need to see as whole and Western dualisms (mind body dualism) believe in ultimate reality where matter or spirit are unite so that in ancient peorid unity in diversity is present in Rastra. Rastra was not as a political or territorial entity rather it was integration of dharma, Sanskriti, Bhumi, Lokasamgraha. He observes Rashtra not as a territorial bounded entity, but as a civilizational field, a moral and relational order that synthesizes Dharma, Artha, and Rajya into a logical state. Malhotra asserts that the Rashtra is a medium through which one can serve Dharma. The Rashtra is an institution of the Rashtra, which is intended to promote the welfare of that Rashtra (Rashtra, Rajya, and Dharma Explained). Further, he states that India cannot be seen as bundle of new or old, accidentally ignored together, it is Indian civilization where unity in diversity is present which means differences based on cultures religions, philosophies are not discriminated while integrate diverse capability of humanity. (Malhotra, 2011) ^[10].

Jayaswal, and Malhotra reconstruct the concept of Rashtra, Jayaswal provides its historical, constitutional or legal foundation in terms of law-bound kingship where people have to follow law also king derived legitimacy through consent of people, Kapoor reconstitutes its philosophical view in terms of the unity of knowledge, which means knowledge can be different but the denote the absolute reality, and Malhotra places it within a civilizational aspect in terms of integral unity. Together, they restore an indigenous belief that opposes the colonial reduction of Rashtra to a mere statehood and confirming its moral cosmic nature (Malhotra, 2011, Jayaswal, 1943) ^[6, 10]

Decolonization Rastra

According to Anibal Quijano, coloniality of power provides a framework to understand it colonialism is not merely an

economic political system, rather it controls the episteme framework, such as knowledge, culture and thought. Even if colonialism is destroyed, that thinking is still present in the society it is called colonialism. so that colonialism continuously effects language ideas cultures and thinking. it means it is a colonialism without colonies so in the political theory concept like a state nation and sovereignty has been regarded as universal while Indian concept of Rastra or another concept are considered inferior it means Indian concept are seen through western standard so because of this Indian concept loses its indigenous (Quijano,2007) ^[2].

Wallerstein said that European knowledge is regarded as universal, so it can be applied across the world. European history, experiences, values, and culture are a universal standard. Because of this, Indian knowledge is rejected by Europe. In the West, the concept of Rastra is equal to state or nation, but in the ancient India Rastra does not mean only state; it is based on Dharma and cosmic order. It's not only political and economic but also spiritual (Wallerstein, 1997) ^[16].

Bhikhu Parekh said that we will have to articulate an Indian category, such as Dharma Rastra, in its own moral spiritual category to challenge Western universalism. It means Indian political thought must be defined and explained by non-Western thought or a language because Indian concepts, such as Dharmarajya, consist moral and spiritual context if they are translated as religion and state, so it loses its original meaning (Parekh, 1992) ^[12].

According to Bhikhu Parekh, decolonization of political theory it's not merely institutional historical but also conceptual and linguistic. so, we must understand the concept of Rastra, how it evolved historically during the Rig Veda to Arthasastra over a period The word consisted of different dimensions in the Rigveda period; the Rastra word was used for Kingdom, royal territory, and jurisdiction of sovereignty. The Rastra duties were to protect the people (tribal community) within a territory.

In the Vedic period, Rastra was associated with Janapada, which means Kshatriya (Rajan) governs a territorial state. Kshatriya duties were to protect the territory and to control bhaga, Bali, and sulka by Rajan.

In the Arthasastra, Rastra is related to the Saptang theory. It was related to a Janapada, territory or administration, which means territory and people aim to follow Raj Dharm. In short, in the Rigveda tribal community, later the Vedic period Janapada, and Arthasastra Rastra was sovereign and centralised state that is known as the Saptang theory.

Kapil Kapoor argues that translation was the first instrument of colonialization. When Western scholars translated Indian texts. so, they did not only change the language but also changed the meaning, context epistemic structure. For example, Dharma becomes religion, artha becomes economy, and Rastra becomes a state. In Indian tradition, it is not only about meaning, Rashtra is not only a state, but also a civilization entity in which the society's culture and morality are emphasized (Kapoor,2005).

Kapoor declared that these translations have broken the holistic unity that is called sastra-Eka. Western Translation dismembered Unity because they divided Indian culture into state, religion, and economy but in Indian culture, they are interconnected or interrelated. Kapil Kapoor asserts that decolonization is not only political and ideological, but also a philosophical recovery means reversing the original meaning. We will have to return to sabda Pramana where

the original words are presented. We should return to sabda pramana, meaning sabda (the word) Pramana (authority of valid sources of knowledge). In the Indian context, words are not just a source of communication, but it is a source of truth or knowledge. Therefore, decolonization is a means of restoring the epistemic knowledge through indigenous words and categories. Kapil Kapoor's stated that we need to understand renewal through a different process, it means that renewal also involves extension or a deepening of thought. In Indian tradition, renewal is never a failure, but it is a sustainable development and a deepening of thought. (Kapoor,2005).

Rajiv Malhotra proposed the principle of integral unity to decline western dualism, such as sacred-secular, body-mind, states-society, and religion-politics. According to him, Indian tradition is based on integral unity where every dimension, perspectives like knowledge, authority, values, truth, and life, is interconnected and integrated. According to the Malhotra principle also applies with Rastra. It shouldn't be understood only in terms of political, economic administrative, but also related to the spiritual Dharma civilization field because it is not only frameworks of political, administrative, but also its moral culture and spiritual, in which society Dharma and Artha are interconnected (Malhotra, 2011) ^[10].

Rashtra is a medium by which people or society are protected by upholding Dharma. Rastra's organ is a Raja. It aims to protect the interests of its own Rastra. Thus, Rastra is ethical, cosmic, dharmic, and civilizational rather than a political entity. It is distinguished from a Western state because it's not about power; rather it's based on Dharma.

Conclusion

Toward an Indigenous Political Episteme

Rashtra's decolonization is not a return to the past, but a remark on India's political self-understanding. From the Rigveda's cosmic vision of order, means kingship is based on 'Rta' or dharma ensuring balance or righteousness. through the Mahabharata's ethical kingship means king's power or authority is based on moral principles, justice and welfare of the people rather than derived from coercive or force, to Kautirya's pragmatic yet moral kingdom, followed Rajadharma, need to have effective power and moral legitimacy to survive or protection, to uphold Rta or dharma that includes spirituality, ethics, and politics.

The modern "State" is composed of mechanical, contractual, and coercive an external order created to manage fear and conflict (Hobbes, 1651). Rashtra is organic, ethical, and cosmological an internalized order based on moral law.

As Parekh, Quijano, and Malhotra remind us, decolonization is not about rejecting or ignoring modernity but pluralizing it. The recovery of Rashtra is an epistemic alternative to a dharmic model of political order based on Rta, Dharma, and Artha.

Kautilya asserts that the ruler's happiness lies in the welfare of the people. This ethical insight encompasses the essence of Indian political thought: that political power is not an end but a means of maintaining cosmic and moral harmony.

As Malhotra said, the task before contemporary scholars to include diversity, recover to decolonize Rashtra grounded in dharma, sustained by Rta, and inspired by the enduring pursuit of truth.

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