

The Concept of RTA and Cosmic Justice: Some Reflections

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of Rta in Indian Philosophy to present a holistic understanding of the cosmos and human nature. The universe is a cosmos not a chaos. Like the structure of the galactic system or the solar system, there is also the same structure in a tiny atom. Order is the underlying principle in all particulars, animate and inanimate, mobile and immobile, small and big. The concept of Rta is the moral foundation of the universe. The aim of this paper is to highlight the foundational role of Rta to establish cosmic harmony. Without understanding the concept of Rta, it is not possible to understand the karma doctrine, justice, righteousness, moral principle etc. Rta and Satya are indifferent. Rta is held to be the moral order. So the world has a moral foundation. The concept of Rta refers to the principle that sustains social order and harmony. Like things, both physical and moral are closely interfused. So we find one immutable law is operating everywhere in men and nature. Rta offers an enduring model of cosmic justice by integrating natural order, moral responsibility, and spiritual insight. The ultimate well-being of the individual, society and the universe consists in living in harmony with Rta. This paper reveals how the concept of Rta, Dharma, and Karma is guiding human beings towards moral living. Modern ethical discourse can be enriched by revisiting this ancient concept and inspiring a more harmonious relationship between humanity, society, and the universe.

Keywords: *Rta, Cosmic Justice, Dharma, Karma, Moral Order, Satya, Social Harmony.*

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Introduction

The concept of justice has been understood as a moral, or legal mechanism to regulate conduct and resolve conflicts in human societies. Ancient Indian thought presented a far more comprehensive vision of justice, which is expressed through the Vedic concept of Zta, the cosmic principle of order, harmony, and truth. Zta represents not merely a moral law but a universal law that rules both the Cosmos and human life. The concept of cosmic justice emerges from this understanding that justice is not an external imposition upon human being rather arises from the alignment of individual actions with the cosmic law and order. This article reflects on the concept of Zta and explores its significance as the foundation of cosmic justice in Indian philosophical thought.

The concept of Rta is so fundamental that not a single English word can explain it. There are so many scholars who have translated Rta as natural law, cosmic order, moral principle, truth, righteousness, etc. All of these words are correct, but none of them is sufficient to explain the concept Rta. Rta stands for all of them simultaneously. We can consider it as Physical law, Moral law and Metaphysical principle.

Everything that happens in nature like the sun rising in the east, the water flows downwards, the season changes throughout the year, water boils, evaporates, and freezes at a particular temperature, etc., are the laws of physics in our vocabulary, and they are Rta. These natural regularities were not separated from moral or metaphysical principles. In the Vedic understanding, Physical Laws, Metaphysical principles and Moral Laws are not separated from one another, rather all these are three expressions of the same underlying reality. The same word Rta covers all these three dimensions. Speaking the truth, keeping a promise and acting justly and fairly align with Rta. Similarly to do an unjust action, to break faith and to tell a lie are violations of Rta. The Vedic tradition considers ethics and physics as expressions of the same underlying principle of right order.

Meaning and Origin of Zta

The word Rta comes from the Sanskrit root 'r' which means to move, to flow. So, that which flows rightly or which moves in its right way is Rta. For example a river in its proper channel, the Sun in its orbit, a human being living with honesty and integrity is Rta. In the Zg Veda, Zta signifies the fundamental principle that maintains order and regularity in the universe. It denotes truthful action, the proper functioning of moral and natural laws. Zta is neither a man-made rule nor a divine command arbitrarily imposed; rather, it is an inherent principle that sustains existence itself. Every action, both of celestial bodies and human ethical behavior functions under the governance of Zta.

According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, Rta literally means “the course of things”. It stands for law in general and the immanence or fountain of justice. Rta denotes the order of the world¹. Rta is described as the fundamental and inherent law of nature (RV4.24.8-9). It is the controlling and the sustaining power in nature, Rta ordains the laws of the physical worlds; regulates the laws of birth, growth and decay in nature (RV 2.28.4).

Veda maaso dhritavrato dvadasha prajavatah Veda ya upajayate

“He knows the twelve months with their progeny, and he knows the one that is born thereafter.”(Rigveda 1.25.8)— Varuna’s omniscience extends to the cosmic calendar itself: he knows the twelve months, the seasons, and even what comes after the cycle ends and begins again. This is not merely meteorological knowledge — it is the knowledge of Rta, the cosmic order that governs all of time.

Vi yasya te prithivim suryo na rashmibhistatana Aa yasya te mano jagama duram “He has spread his net across the earth as the sun spreads its rays. He reaches to where your very mind has gone far away.”(Rigveda 7.87.3)— The extraordinary final line — ‘He reaches to where your very mind has gone far away’ — describes an omniscience that is not external surveillance but interior presence. Varuna knows the secret places of the mind, the unspoken thought, the intention before it becomes action. He is simultaneously the external law and the internal witness.

All the natural forces in the environment are controlled and balanced by Rta , which is also the moral order . Another distinctive feature of the concept of Rta is that it also gives emphasis on a certain, firm, and immutable law whose purpose is ethical in nature. There are certain aspects of the cosmic phenomenon Rta.

According to P.V.Kane, Rta means –

- a) The ‘Course of nature’ or the regular and general order in the cosmos;
- b) The correct and the ordered way of the cult of the Gods; and
- c) It means the moral conduct of man.²“Ztam ca satyam câbhîddhâ tapaso ‘dhyajâyata” (Zgveda10.190.1)³ [“From that great tapas were born both [ta and satya.”]

In the Zgveda, Zta functions as the sustaining principle of the cosmos. In the Vedic hymns the gods are repeatedly described as ‘followers of Zta’, which suggests that divine authority itself is guided by cosmic law. Zta ensures the reliability of natural phenomena, the efficacy of ritual action, and the moral accountability of human beings.⁴

In Zgveda (4.23.8), Indra is praised for his efforts to uphold Zta. However, the same hymn acknowledges that even Indra can be misled when he acts out of personal desire rather than cosmic obligation. The universe functions harmoniously

when the gods of Zgveda maintain Zta; consciousness experiences serenity and clarity, the heavenly bodies follow their course, and rain falls at the proper times. When they violate Zta, there occurs Chaos including perplexity, darkness, and drought. These are psychological truths related to the processes of consciousness that arise when human beings either follow or violate the cosmic order, rather than being merely mythological narratives.

The unmanifest Brahman expresses itself in the manifest world. Rta is the cosmic principle that governs every action in the world. For example - Rta governs how waves move, rivers flow. It is a process in which the infinite makes itself knowable through pattern, regularity and order.

Zta as Cosmic Order

In the Vedic worldview, the universe is structured and intelligible, not chaotic. Zta is the fundamental principle responsible for the orderly movement of the heavenly bodies, the cycle of day and night, the change of seasons, and the rhythm of natural processes. Nature follows Zta with precision, reflecting harmony and balance. This cosmic order reveals that the universe is ruled by lawfulness rather than chance. Any deviation in this order is seen not as accidental but as the result of deviation from Zta.

The concept of Rta introduced the cosmic order of things to us. We know that without sufficient reason nothing is supposed to occur in this universe. Nothing is a chance or an accident. Everywhere you find uniformity and continuity in the course of things. So the world is not chaotic. It is an ordered whole, a system where everything is interrelated to one another.

We can not escape from the law that functions in spite of our will which is called the moral law. It is working both in the course of nature and in the lives of human beings. It governs the course of nature as the law of nature whereas it works at the moral law in the minds of men. It is the same law that forces all things and all objects to work in their appointed course both in the world and in the individual. So the individual and the world cannot be set apart. For their existence and movement, both of them need each other. If the individual works on the world, the action is responded to and guided by the universe. Both of them are guided by the universal moral law which upholds their existence and movement.

The world is not only a mere physical order, but it is morally sensitive. It responds to our moral actions by reward and punishment, merit and demerit, advantages and disadvantages. But the question is who gives rewards and punishments. So it implies that there must be some cosmic system that teaches us about righteousness, duty and judges us accordingly. Otherwise everybody would

just do whatever they want and the individual dharma and karma would be meaningless and the cosmos would be plunged into chaos. The Rig Veda calls this cosmic system of teaching, judging and enforcing dharma and karma as Rta.

The Indian thinkers never divided between moral and physical. In the nature of things, both physical and moral are closely interfused. So we find one immutable law is operating everywhere in man and nature. The physical is not amoral. In this sense, Rta is an all-pervasive law. It provides moral significance to both the individual being and the world in which the individual lives and acts.

Cosmic justice refers to the idea that justice is inherent in the structure of the universe itself. It implies that there is an interconnection between moral order and natural order and according to universal law human actions inevitably produce corresponding results. Zta and Moral Order are the basis of cosmic justice. Cosmic justice, in the Vedic sense, arises from the inseparable connection between cosmic order and moral order. Human beings, as part of the cosmos, are expected to live in accordance with Zta. Ethical conduct is not merely a social necessity but a cosmic responsibility. Cosmic harmony can be maintained when individuals act justly, truthfully, and selflessly. Conversely, disharmony is created by immoral actions, leading to pain, misery and disorder. Thus, justice is embedded in the moral fabric of the universe itself.

Zta, Dharma, and Karma

Throughout the Vedic period, there have been identified three phases of development of the concept of law have been identified. The concept of Rta is associated with the early Vedic period, Satya with the middle and later Vedic periods, and the concept of Dharma is associated with the post-Vedic times. According to Rta, by following moral principles an individual can develop into a fully human being, fair to society and the universe without any compulsion. Dharma is the basic source of all laws and principles. It is therefore the basis of order, harmony, and uniformity that every individual follows. The way in which Rta is to the Cosmic realm, Dharma is also to the 'social law'. In order to maintain the social order and harmony, Dharma enforces all duties, responsibilities, and conventions. The notion of Zta later evolves into the concept of Dharma and Karma. Zta represents cosmic order, whereas Dharma translates this universal principle into moral, social, and individual duties. On the other hand, Karma explains how actions produce consequences in correspondence to the alignment or misalignment with Zta. Together, these concepts present a comprehensive framework of cosmic justice, where moral causation functions without the requirement of an external judge. Justice is neutral, automatic, and inevitable.

In the article ‘The Concept of Zta in the Vedas: Cosmic Order and Its Ethical Dimensions’, Dr. Krishna Panda noted that in ancient Indian thought, the Vedic concept of Zta is a fundamental idea, encapsulating both the cosmic law and order that governs the whole universe and the moral principle that guides human behaviour. This article examines the several dimensions of Zta as depicted in the Vedas, encompassing its philosophical relevance, its impact on social and moral norms, and its evolution into subsequent concepts of Dharma and Karma. This research gives emphasis on the close connection between cosmic order and ethical duty by analyzing the representation of Zta in Vedic literature and its ongoing effect on Indian philosophy.⁵ Nature and moral principles were not considered as two different domains in Vedic philosophy. The two are viewed as one and the same. The movement of heavenly bodies was determined and the principles of truth, balance and harmony in human existence were defined by the same universal order. Rta is not created by any gods or goddesses; rather they were the custodians and executors of it.

The word Dharma is closely connected with the word Rta. There is no difference between the words Rta, Satya and Dharma. Generally these words are used synonymously in the Indian context. The mental perception of Rta is Satya.⁶ Dharma is known as the all-pervading law which upholds both the life of human beings in particular and society in general. In every sphere of human life dharma is perceived as righteous conduct. Dharma is different from religion. It unites humanity. It is the creation of the world order, cosmos. Like Rta it is the eternal law of nature and the moral principle which governs humankind.

In Indian philosophy one of the most important moral concepts is the Law of Karma. It states that as you sow, so shall you reap. Every action whether it is good or bad must produce a consequence. Good action produces good results and bad action produces bad results. So as per the Karma doctrine, by performing our own duty, we can produce merit, punya or virtue in the soul. Similarly violating a rule, doing wrong action we produce demerit, vice or papa in the soul.

Man is a social animal. He lives in society. So the moral action of people represents a harmony between society and individuals. Therefore, in order to have a better society man must have some noble qualities which are possible through the Law of karma. To overcome any kind of social evil in the present society, the ethical significance of karma can not be denied. Individuals should be inspired by the law of karma in order to live more ethically and responsibly. The moral implications of the doctrine of karma encourage individual responsibility, ethical growth, and compassion, kindness for others, which can make a harmonious society. Therefore, it can be said that the doctrine of karma encourages human beings to do noble

things for others in their life. If everybody follows the karma doctrine, then there will never be problems such as injustice, inequalities, conflicts, social evils, crime, corruption, etc.

Cosmic Justice Beyond Legal Formalism

In Vedic literature, deities are not just arbitrary governors, but guardians of Zta. Gods like VaruGa, Indra and Mitra are depicted as protectors of moral and cosmic order. Among them, the central position was occupied by Varuna as he was the overseer of truth and justice. His authority does not stem from power alone but from moral vigilance. The purpose of giving punishment is corrective rather than vindictive, aimed at restoring harmony and equilibrium rather than instilling fear.

Cosmic justice is not like modern legal systems that rely on external enforcement, rather it is rooted in Zta, which emphasizes self-control and self-guidance. Justice works naturally through the structure of reality itself. This vision promotes ethical awareness and avoids rigid legalism. Individuals are encouraged to act justly not out of fear of punishment but out of understanding their place within the cosmic order. Justice thus becomes an internalized value rather than an imposed constraint. We could also say it as cosmic governance. The laws of cosmic governance never change unlike other forms of governance such as theocracy, autocracy and democracy. These forms of governance apply different principles to the rulers and the ruled. But Rta is a stable system of governance in which principles never change. But in this cosmic system rules are the same for all.

Human Responsibility and Social Harmony

Due to the capacity of moral reflection, human beings occupy a unique position in the cosmic order. In order to live according to Zta requires adherence to moral values such as truth, self-restraint, and duty. Social harmony and stability naturally follow as a consequence when individual beings and things align their actions with Zta, Social injustice, violence and exploitation are seen as manifestations of cosmic imbalance. Therefore, social justice is not different from cosmic justice, but rather is its direct extension.

The present age in which we live has largely lost the concept of Rta — which does not mean the reality of it, rather the conscious recognition of it. We have natural law without moral law — All of us know how the material universe behaves or operates but we have severed this knowledge from any other framework of ethical implication. In modern understanding, we have no opinion about how we treat each other, how we treat nature, or what kind of life we choose to lead. Physics describes the fact. It does not prescribe.

The ethical expression of Zta is truth or satya . Alignment with cosmic order is reflected in truthfulness in speech and action. The extension of cosmic order is moral order. Human beings must align their actions with Zta to maintain harmony; immoral actions bring disharmony and disrupt both social and cosmic balance. When human beings follow Zta-based values like truth, duty, righteousness and restraint, social harmony and justice are naturally maintained.

The Vedic tradition would find this severance not merely philosophically unsatisfying but practically dangerous. A universe without having any moral dimension can't offer any direction or guidance, have any consequence, or any framework for the kind of wisdom that human beings require to live well together. In the Vedic understanding, a civilisation that functions as though only physical laws exist and moral laws are merely conventions is, a civilisation in Anrta — in cosmic misalignment — whatever may be its scientific achievements.

This is not an argument for theocracy or for the imposition of any particular religious tradition's moral code on anyone else. It is an argument for the recognition that the universe — whatever its ultimate nature — appears to be organised in ways that reward certain ways of living and punish others, not arbitrarily but systematically. That justice, truth, care for the vulnerable, respect for the natural world, and the fulfilment of genuine obligations are not merely nice ideas but expressions of something real — something that the ancient Indians called Rta.

Conclusion

One of the most comprehensive and sophisticated ethical visions in the intellectual history of human beings is the concept of Rta. The development of Zta into the ideas of Dharma and Karma shows how cosmic order became connected with individual duty and social justice. By rediscovering Zta, modern humanity is encouraged to understand ethics not as force or mere convenience, but as living in harmony with the rhythm of existence. To live ethically is to live truthfully, righteously and consciously as a part of the cosmic order that supports all life.

The concept of Zta presents a profound vision of justice founded in cosmic harmony. It transcends narrow legal definitions and situates justice within the very structure of reality. Zta offers an enduring model of cosmic justice by integrating natural order, moral responsibility, and spiritual insight. Modern ethical discourse can be enriched by revisiting this ancient concept and inspiring a more harmonious relationship between humanity, society, and the universe.

The conception of justice and the concept of a legal system owe their origin to the concept of Rta. The purpose of law is to maintain social order. The social order is envisaged by the legal order. A society envisaged to achieve social ideals

through a legal system. So in the spiritual domain Rta is the highest end and through the system of obligatory rules that cannot be altered. The highest secular aim, which is justice can be achieved only by a legal system. Thus Rta has a great contribution to the idea of justice in the social order.

Despite its profundity, the concept of cosmic justice raises certain philosophical questions. It may appear insufficient to address individual pain and suffering or historical injustice. Moreover, modern rational thought demands logical explanation and rational justification rather than cosmic explanation of facts. Therefore, Zta must be reinterpreted in contemporary contexts—not only as a rigid metaphysical theory, but also as a symbolic and moral framework that gives emphasis on harmony, responsibility, and interconnectedness.

Rta was there before the first temple was built and it will also be there after the last one crumbles. It has not gone anywhere. The universe sustains itself by the principle of Rta. It is the operating system beneath every operating system, the law beneath every law, the order that makes any order possible. Zta offers a holistic ethical vision that promotes duty, responsibility, harmony and balance in individual, social, and universal life.

In the modern age, where there is environmental degradation, moral crises, and social fragmentation, the concept of Zta provides valuable insights. Respect for nature, moral responsibility, and sustainable living are encouraged by it. Ecological imbalance can be understood as a violation of cosmic order, calling for a renewed ethical relationship between nature and humans. Thus Rta serves as a guiding principle to address contemporary global challenges.

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