

Rajdharma and Public Infrastructure Governance in Contemporary India: A Study of Highway Safety and Policy Priorities

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Abstract

Public infrastructure is a paramount obligation of contemporary states, directly influencing economic advancement, mobility, and public welfare. The swift proliferation of highway networks across India has demonstrably improved regional connectivity and fostered economic integration. Nevertheless, enduring challenges related to road safety, infrastructure upkeep, and policy prioritization persist, thereby straining existing governance structures. This study examines contemporary infrastructure governance in India, employing the conceptual framework of the Indian Knowledge Tradition. Rajdharma, as a normative principle, underscores the moral imperative for rulers to prioritize the welfare of their subjects. Classical Indian texts, including the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Arthashastra, Bhagavata Purana, and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, collectively portray governance as a moral obligation. This obligation is predicated on the preservation of societal safety, the promotion of well-being, and the effective administration of the populace. Consequently, these texts delineate the ruler's responsibilities, which encompass the maintenance of public infrastructure, the assurance of secure travel, and the advancement of social welfare. Similarly, Buddhist political thought, particularly the ideal of the Dharmaraja, provides principles of governance based on compassion, accountability and the protection of citizens' welfare.

The paper also analyses judicial cases by the Supreme Court of India and other High Courts that increasingly acknowledge safe public

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infrastructure as one of the most important dimensions of the Right to Life (under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution). It also analyses a case study of National Highway NH-140D that demonstrates real-world governance issues related to highway safety and maintenance. The study argues that integrating ethical insights from the Indian Knowledge Tradition with modern constitutional governance will improve infrastructure policy accountability and contribute to a more welfare-oriented and ethically grounded development paradigm.

Keywords: *Rajdharm, Indian Knowledge Tradition, Infrastructure Governance, Highway Safety, Public Welfare, Ethics in Governance*

Introduction

Infrastructure development is generally considered as an important factor in economic growth and national progress. Roads and highways of a country play an important role in connecting different regions of a country, especially linking rural remote areas with urban centres. They ease transportation, trade, access to services and overall mobility of people and goods. In recent times, India has heavily invested in the development and expansion of its highway network. We have seen a remarkable increase in the road infrastructure initiatives by the government, both at the centre as well as at the regional level, that have contributed to economic development and improved the transportation of goods and services across the country.

Despite this rapid expansion of infrastructure, we can witness a number of challenges related to road safety and maintenance that continue to persist. We can find multiple instances where highways suffer from poor maintenance, damaged road surfaces, lack of proper signage and insufficient safety infrastructure. In several instances accidents are also caused by stray animals entering highways due to poorly designed segments which result in loss or harm of the lives of stray animals as well as humans involved. Such problems highlight gaps in governance and raise questions and doubts regarding the effectiveness of existing structures and their maintenance before investing heavily in new road infrastructure projects. It is important for the government that while constructing new highways and expressways they must not forget about the old road infrastructure. This ethical governance will result in a decline in the cases of the loss of life and livelihood due to poor road condition incidents.

These challenges give rise to an important question regarding the priorities of infrastructure development. On one hand the economic growth and expansion of the road network is important but on the other hand the government should keep a sincere check on the safety and welfare of the people using the road to avoid any major incidents. The development of infrastructure should not be viewed only in terms of physical construction, it must also include responsible governance, proper maintenance and adequate safety measures.

In this context, Indian Knowledge Tradition provides a valuable philosophical perspective for examining the ethical responsibilities of governance. Ancient Indian thinkers often viewed governance not merely as a system of authority but as a moral duty aimed at protecting society and promoting the welfare of the people. The ethical orientation of Indian civilization can be seen in the well-known Sanskrit prayer:

“सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः
सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु
मा कश्चिद् दुःखभाग भवेत् ।”

This prayer expresses the idea that all people should live in happiness and be free from suffering. Such ideas reflect a broader emphasis on collective welfare that has been present in Indian philosophical traditions for centuries.

Early references to responsible governance can also be found in the Vedas, where social harmony, order, and collective well-being are emphasized. The Vedic concept of [ra] represents the idea of maintaining order and balance in society, which was considered an important responsibility of rulers and leaders.

The Upanishads, including the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, also highlight ethical conduct and wisdom in leadership. These texts emphasize that governance should be guided by moral responsibility and concern for the well-being of society.

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata further develop these ideas of ethical governance. In the Ramayana, the idea of Rama Rajya represents an ideal system of governance where the ruler is expected to ensure justice, peace, and welfare for the people. The king is seen as responsible for maintaining order and ensuring that the people of the kingdom live safely and peacefully.

A more systematic explanation of governance can be found in Kautilya's Arthashastra, an important ancient text on statecraft and administration. Apart from these traditions, Buddhist philosophy also contributed significantly to ideas about ethical governance. Buddhist teachings emphasize the concept of Dhamma, which refers to moral and righteous conduct. The idea of the Dharmaraja, or a righteous ruler, highlights the expectation that rulers should govern with compassion, justice, and responsibility towards the welfare of the people. Historical examples such as the policies of Emperor Ashoka demonstrate how ethical principles were incorporated into governance.

Taken together, these traditions show that ancient Indian political thought consistently emphasized the responsibility of rulers to ensure the welfare and safety of society. The concept of Rajdharm therefore represents an important ethical principle in Indian political philosophy.

In modern India, similar ideas can be seen in the constitutional framework of governance. The Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution has been interpreted by courts to include the right to safety and dignity in everyday life. In recent years, the judiciary has increasingly emphasized the responsibility of the state to ensure safe public infrastructure, including roads and highways. Against this background, this paper examines the issue of highway safety and infrastructure governance in contemporary India through the lens of Rajdharm and Indian Knowledge Tradition.

Objectives

This paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the concept of Rajdharm in classical Indian political thought and its relevance for modern constitutional governance.
2. To analyze ethical principles of governance within the Indian Knowledge Tradition.

3. To evaluate contemporary challenges in infrastructure governance in India, particularly those related to highway safety.
4. To examine NH-140D as a case study illustrating governance challenges in highway maintenance and safety.
5. To explore how ethical insights from Indian Knowledge Tradition can reform modern infrastructure policy.

Literature Review

The concept of governance in public welfare has been heavily discussed in classical Indian Political thought as well as in modern academics. Ancient Indian texts provide one of the oldest frameworks of ethical governance, particularly through the doctrine of Rajdharma, in which the welfare of the people is the top priority of the political authority. The Arthashastra of Kautilya is one of the most influential treatises on governance and statecraft. Kautilya clearly states that “in the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king,” thereby establishing welfare-oriented governance as the primary objective of the state (Rangarajan, Arthashastra, 1992, p.100). Scholars such as R. P. Kangle have noted that the Arthashastra outlines a comprehensive administrative framework where officials were responsible for maintaining public infrastructure, regulating trade routes, and ensuring the safety of travellers (Kangle, The Kautilya Arthasastra, 1965, p.13).

Similarly, the Mahabharata, particularly the Shanti Parva, talks about the duties of rulers and emphasizes that it is the utmost duty of the king to protect the people and guarantee public welfare. According to Ram Sharan Sharma, the Shanti Parva contains one of the most detailed discussions on Rajdharma, highlighting justice, protection of citizens, and administrative accountability as essential components of governance (Sharma, Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India, 1987, p.64). Ethical leadership grounded in compassion is also reflected in the Bhagavata Purana, where the story of King Rantideva illustrates the ideal of rulers prioritizing the suffering and welfare of others above personal interests.

Modern scholars have also emphasized the relevance of ethical governance in contemporary public policy. Amartya Sen argues that Indian intellectual traditions historically emphasized welfare and public reasoning in governance, suggesting that ethical considerations have long shaped political decision-making in the subcontinent (Sen, The Idea of Justice, 2009, p.34). In the context of infrastructure governance, studies by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and international agencies indicate that inadequate maintenance and safety infrastructure contribute significantly to road accidents in India.

Main Body

The Indian political philosophy has always placed a strong emphasis on the idea that governance is not just an administrative activity, but a moral responsibility based on ethical principles and general welfare. The idea that, it is the utmost duty of the ruler to ensure that his governance must benefit their subjects can be easily found in the Indian Knowledge Tradition. The doctrine of Rajdharma works as a central pillar of this ethical framework and represents the duties and responsibilities of rulers towards their people. In ancient Indian texts, governance was closely

linked with the moral duty to protect society, maintain order, and ensure the welfare of the general public. These principles continue to have relevance in today's discussions on governance, public administration, and infrastructure management

In the Indian civilizational context, the moral foundations of governance can be traced back to the Vedic period. The Vedas talk about a worldview in which social harmony, justice and welfare are the most essential components for the stability of the society. The famous Sanskrit prayer "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah, Sarve Santu Niramayah, Sarve Bhadrani Pashyantu, Ma Kashchid Duhkha Bhag Bhavet" reflects the ethical aspiration that all individuals should be happy and free from suffering (Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, 1953, p. 683). This prayer embodies the ethical foundation of Indian political thought, underscoring that governance should focus on the universal good. Thus, from the earliest philosophical texts, governance was seen as an ethical obligation rather than merely a political authority.

The moral aspect of governance has been further explained in the Ramayana, which portrays the ideal of righteous kingship through the character of Lord Rama, the ideal king (Maryada Purushottam). Rama's character is built on unwavering integrity and adherence to dharma (righteousness). He always upholds truth, keeps his promises, and maintains ethical conduct. Good governance requires leaders to be honest, accountable, and morally upright, serving as role models for their subjects.

रघुकुल रीत सदा चली आई
प्राण जाए पर वचन न जाई

Translation (by Ralph T. H. Griffith): "The custom of Raghu's line still holds its course unshaken yet; His promise gives up life, but never is a promise set. This couplet conveys the greatness of Lord Rama's lineage and the unwavering commitment to truth and honour.

The Mahabharata, especially in the Shanti Parva, offers an in-depth exploration of Rajdharma. Through the conversation between Bhishma and Yudhishtira, it delivers comprehensive advice on the duties of rulers and the moral underpinnings of leadership. The text underscores the necessity for rulers to safeguard their people, uphold justice, and maintain social stability. The Shanti Parva consistently highlights that a king's role is to serve the people's welfare, and the kingdom's prosperity is tied to the citizens' well-being (Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, 1987, p. 64).

Among the classical works on governance and administration, Kautilya's Arthashastra stands out for its comprehensive examination of statecraft. This text outlines a structured administrative system where the ruler and his officials are tasked with ensuring public welfare, maintaining infrastructure, and safeguarding economic activities. Kautilya is well-known for asserting that "in the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king; in their welfare lies his welfare" (Rangarajan, *Arthashastra*, 1992, p. 100). This declaration emphasizes the significance of governance centered on the welfare of the populace in ancient Indian political ideology. The Arthashastra also provides detailed guidelines for the maintenance of roads, trade routes, and public facilities. Thus, infrastructure management and public safety were considered essential functions of governance even in ancient times.

The Buddhist political philosophy also emphasises ethical governance. Central to the Buddhist philosophy is the concept of the Dharmaraja, or the righteous ruler. According to the Buddhist texts, an ideal ruler is someone who protects the welfare of all beings and promotes social harmony. One of the major examples of such ethical governance is Emperor Ashoka. After embracing Buddhism Ashoka adopted policies that were central to public welfare, moral governance and the protection of both humans and animals. His inscriptions revealed that he ordered the construction of roads, wells and even rest houses for travellers.

The ethical ideals expressed in classical Indian texts also resonate with contemporary governance principles. In modern constitutional democracies, the legitimacy of the state depends on its ability to protect citizens and ensure public welfare. In India, the Constitution recognizes the right to life and personal liberty as a fundamental right under Article 21. Over time, the judiciary has expanded the interpretation of Article 21 to include the right to live with dignity and protection from hazardous conditions. This evolving jurisprudence reflects a growing recognition that governance must ensure safe living conditions and protect citizens from avoidable risks.

In recent years, the judiciary's role in ensuring accountability for infrastructure has gained considerable importance. The Supreme Court of India has consistently stressed that public authorities are obligated to uphold their duties in maintaining secure infrastructure. In the pivotal case of *Municipal Council, Ratlam V. Vardhichand* (1980), the Supreme Court ruled that local authorities cannot disregard public dangers that affect citizens and must take active steps to mitigate them. The Court highlighted that governance bodies have a responsibility to safeguard public welfare and cannot shirk their duties due to administrative limitations. This ruling set a crucial precedent for holding public authorities accountable. Likewise, in *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (1987), the Supreme Court broadened the interpretation of Article 21, asserting that the right to life encompasses the right to a safe and healthy environment. Although this case primarily addressed environmental concerns, its principles have wider implications for infrastructure governance. Dangerous road conditions, poor infrastructure upkeep, and insufficient safety measures can pose direct threats to human life and thus fall under constitutional protection.

The case study of National Highway NH-140D

The case study of National Highway NH-140D provides a practical example of the challenges associated with infrastructure governance. NH-140D is an important regional highway that connects several areas and supports transportation and economic activity. However, reports from commuters and local residents have highlighted several safety concerns along this highway. These include damaged road surfaces, inadequate protective barriers, the presence of stray animals entering highway lanes, and insufficient monitoring of road conditions. Such issues increase the risk of accidents and highlight gaps in infrastructure maintenance.

These challenges illustrate a broader pattern within infrastructure governance in which policy attention is often directed toward the construction of new highways while the maintenance of existing infrastructure receives comparatively less priority. From the perspective of Rajdharma, such governance failures raise important ethical questions regarding the responsibility of the state to protect the lives of citizens. The ethical framework of Indian political thought suggests that

rulers must ensure not only economic development but also the safety and well-being of those who use public infrastructure.

Integrating insights from Indian Knowledge Tradition into contemporary infrastructure governance can therefore provide valuable guidance for policymakers. Ethical governance requires a balanced approach that prioritizes public safety, administrative accountability, and responsible infrastructure management. Infrastructure policy should not focus solely on expansion and economic growth but must also address maintenance, safety standards, and long-term sustainability. The ethical ideals articulated in the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Arthashastra, and Buddhist philosophy collectively emphasize that governance must ultimately serve the welfare of society.

Thus, the relevance of Rajdharma extends beyond historical scholarship and offers meaningful insights for contemporary governance. When infrastructure policies are guided by ethical principles that prioritize the safety and welfare of citizens, governance becomes more accountable and responsive to public needs. The convergence of ancient ethical traditions and modern constitutional jurisprudence demonstrates that the principles of Rajdharma remain highly relevant to shaping responsible governance in contemporary India.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that welfare-centred governance is deeply rooted in the Indian Knowledge Tradition. Rajdharma functioned less as an abstract ideal than as a working directive for rulers, and ancient Indian literature repeatedly tied the legitimacy of political power to a ruler's capacity to protect and provide for the governed. The welfare prayers of the Vedic corpus, the ideal of Rama Rajya in the Ramayana, the sustained treatment of Rajdharma in the Mahabharata, and the administrative prescriptions of the Arthashastra converge on a single principle: governance exists for the good of society. Kautilya's insistence that the ruler's happiness lies in the happiness of his subjects, the compassion of King Rantideva in the Bhagavata Purana, and the Buddhist figure of the Dharmaraja all frame rule as a moral obligation rather than an exercise of authority.

That inheritance speaks directly to infrastructure governance today. India's rapid highway expansion has driven growth and connectivity, yet road safety, maintenance, and administrative accountability remain unresolved. Poorly maintained surfaces, missing safety provisions, and accidents involving stray animals point to governance gaps rather than technical failures.

The judiciary has responded by reading Article 21 expansively, so that the right to life covers protection from avoidable hazards. *Ratlam v. Vardhichand* and *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*, together with High Court observations on pothole-free roads, establish road maintenance as a constitutional duty rather than a routine administrative matter. The NH-140D case study shows how these gaps appear on the ground: a highway built as a symbol of progress becomes a source of risk when construction is not matched by upkeep and oversight.

Rajdharma therefore offers a usable standard. Development policy should be judged by its effect on public welfare, not economic return alone — expansion paired with maintenance, regulation, and accountability

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