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RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY: AN INSIGHT TO POLITICAL LEADERS.

AUTHORED BY - WASIM MAIRAJ

Abstract

Philosophy denotes what ought to be and religious philosophy with respect to political leadership, implies how a political leader should be. There are different religious philosophies that dictate how an ideal state should be. For instance, the Bhakti movement, Kabir's Begumpura ideal state & Ramarajya philosophy, which advocates for an egalitarian society, is one such example. Furthermore, this paper will shed light on various other religious philosophies that play a pivotal role in giving insight to political leadership. In addition, this paper will explore whether leaders truly implement the noble ideals preached by religion or if it is merely rhetoric. Moreover, we will discuss whether religion is the only basis for governing a country or if there are other factors involved.

Key words: Leadership, Philosophy, Religion, Mahabharat.

I. INTRODUCTION

Like many Muslim-majority nations, Islamic ideals played a significant role in inspiring Indian Muslims during their struggle against colonial rule and the potential threat of Hindu dominance. These ideals championed the recognition of individual rights, equality, and justice for all citizens in a newly independent nation. However, after independence, Pakistan moved away from these foundational principles, and the formation of Bangladesh followed. While Pakistan persisted, the rise of jihadist movements in Afghanistan and Kashmir fueled extremism under the guise of Islam, leading to ethnic and sectarian violence that has destabilized the nation.¹ Islamic principles were often employed as political rhetoric but were seldom implemented in actual governance.

The 2023/2024 Report classifies Pakistan in the 'low' human development category, with an

¹ Abdullah al-Ahsan, "Is Pakistan a Failed State? An Assessment of Islamist Ideals, Nationalist Articulation and Ground Realities" 20 *Insight Turkey* 119 (2018).

HDI score of 0.540 and a global rank of 164 out of 193 countries. In contrast, the 2021/2022 Report recorded an HDI value of 0.544, placing Pakistan 161st among 191 nations.² Pakistan showed no progress on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2022, maintaining its previous rank of 140 out of 180 countries, according to Transparency International.³ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), in its Democracy Index 2023 report, downgraded Pakistan to an “authoritarian regime,” marking it as the most deteriorated country in the “Australia and Asia” region.⁴ In 2022, religious freedom in Pakistan continued to decline, with religious minorities facing frequent attacks and threats, such as blasphemy accusations, targeted killings, lynchings, mob violence, forced conversions, and the desecration of worship sites and cemeteries. This update highlights the rising intolerance toward religious diversity, driven by extremism and problematic legislation, and references recent incidents targeting religious minorities in the country.⁵

II. KEY CONTRIBUTIONS OF BUDDHIST LITERATURE

The Shibi Jataka portrays the ideal ruler’s responsibility to protect his subjects. One day, a sparrow sought refuge with a king, fleeing from a falcon. The falcon demanded the sparrow, asserting its right to survival. To uphold his duty of safeguarding the vulnerable while respecting the falcon’s need, the king selflessly offered his own flesh. This story underscores the values of compassion, self-sacrifice, and justice as essential qualities of leadership.⁶

The Shibi Jataka can be related to contemporary times, where political leadership often employs selective laws to suppress dissent. For example, the arbitrary use of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) highlights misuse of power, alongside instances of executive overreach, such as Sri Lanka’s armed forces committing war crimes and fake encounters in regions like Jammu and Kashmir (e.g., the Shopian incident). Additionally,

² UNDP’s 2023-2024 Human Development Report Points to a Global ‘gridlock’ of Increased Inequality and Political Polarization, *available at*: <https://www.undp.org/pakistan/press-releases/undps-2023-2024-human-development-report-points-global-gridlock-increased-inequality-and-political-polarization> (last visited on Jan. 19, 2025).

³ Pakistan makes no improvement on corruption perception index, *available at*: <https://transparency.org.pk/2023/02/02/pakistan-makes-no-improvement-on-corruption-perception-index/> (last visited on Jan. 19, 2025).

⁴ Jahanzaib Yaseen, “Pakistan downgraded to ‘authoritarian regime’ on Democracy Index”, *INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS*, Feb. 16, 2024.

⁵ Religious Freedom in Pakistan in 2022, *available at*: <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/2022%20Pakistan%20Country%20Update.pdf> (last visited on Jan. 19, 2025).

⁶ Lost Tales of Vedic India: The Dharma Sankat of King Shibi, *available at*: <https://www.thejaipurdialogues.com/sanatana/lost-tales-of-vedic-india-the-dharma-sankat-of-king-shibi/> (last visited Jan. 19, 2025).

“bulldozer justice” and majoritarianism are evident in countries like Pakistan and Myanmar. The data supporting the facts are mentioned below.

According to NCRB data, UAPA cases saw a 24% increase in 2022 compared to the previous year, largely due to political tensions in Manipur, Assam, and Jammu and Kashmir. Of the 1,005 cases reported in 2022, 76% occurred in Assam, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, and J&K. Jammu and Kashmir alone accounted for 371 cases, followed by Manipur with 167 cases and Assam with 133 cases. Uttar Pradesh recorded 101 cases, while Left-ruled Kerala reported 23 cases linked to Left-Wing Extremism.⁷ An RTI query revealed that between 2000 and 2017, India recorded 1,782 cases of fake encounters, with only 1,565 resolved to date. Fake encounters refer to fabricated confrontations staged by police or military forces against individuals perceived as “culprits.” According to NHRC data, Uttar Pradesh accounted for a striking 44.55% (794 cases) of all registered incidents nationwide.⁸ The United Nations human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, has been authorized to gather and preserve evidence of alleged war crimes committed during Sri Lanka’s civil war, which concluded in 2009. The UN estimates that 80,000 to 100,000 people lost their lives in the 26-year conflict with the Tamil Tiger rebels. A resolution by the UN Human Rights Council criticized Sri Lanka for “hindering accountability”.⁹ Indian writer and historian Mukul Kesavan, delivering the 2021 Vakkom Moulavi Memorial Lecture, described majoritarianism as a global political pandemic threatening pluralist societies. He noted that while Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh adopted majoritarianism early, India resisted it until the 1980s, when events like the 1983 Assam massacre and 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom marked a turning point.¹⁰

Buddhist literature outlines certain norms of conduct for both rulers and subjects, which are pivotal for effective governance. Buddhist literature establishes ethical norms for rulers and subjects, emphasizing principles like nonviolence, compassion, and peaceful coexistence. The

⁷ NCRB Report Shows Surge In UAPA Cases; Pendency Of Investigation And Trial Point To Process Being Made The Punishment, *available at*: <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/ncrb-report-shows-surge-in-uapa-cases-pendency-of-investigation-and-trial-point-to-process-being-made-the-punishment-news-337096> (last visited Jan. 19, 2025).

⁸ NHRC registered 1,782 fake encounter cases between 2000-2017; Uttar Pradesh alone accounts for 44.55%, *available at*: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/nhrc-registered-1782-fake-encounter-cases-between-2000-2017-uttar-pradesh-alone-accounts-for-44-55-4332125.html> (last visited on Jan. 20, 2025).

⁹ UN to collect evidence of alleged Sri Lanka war crimes, *available at*: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56502221> (last visited on Jan. 20, 2025).

¹⁰ “Majoritarianism Is A Political Pandemic,” says Mukul Kesavan, *available at*: <https://countercurrents.org/2021/11/majoritarianism-is-a-political-pandemic-says-mukul-kesavan/> (last visited on Jan. 20, 2025).

concept of Panchsheel, central to Buddhism, promotes mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence, offering a framework for fair international relations.¹¹

To relate this to the present context, Myanmar serves as a clear example where the state persecutes its own people, resulting in a humanitarian crisis marked by widespread displacement. The escalating conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State has caused immense suffering, particularly for the Rohingya, amid reports of international law violations and military-incited tensions. Over 3.5 million are displaced, 15 million face food insecurity, and disease outbreaks like cholera worsen as the regime blocks humanitarian aid and safe havens for civilians.¹² This is especially ironic given that Buddhism, deeply ingrained in Myanmar's history, advocates peace and compassion. Similarly, many Buddhist-majority states have used violence as a tool to pursue foreign policy objectives, as seen in cases like North Korea and China. Recently, the Hindu community in Bangladesh has been forced to migrate, highlighting the state's failure to fulfill its primary duty of protecting its people and ensuring their security. Recent attacks on the Hindu community in Bangladesh, including the arrest of prominent spiritual leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, underscore a troubling rise in religious persecution and societal instability. Das, renowned for his humanitarian efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, was detained on unfounded charges. This situation reflects a significant failure of leadership in ensuring the protection of minority rights and maintaining social harmony in the country.¹³

III. HINDU PHILOSOPHY: INSIGHTS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

It is crucial to highlight the relevance of the Manusmriti when discussing Hindu philosophy. According to the Manusmriti, the king's primary duty is to uphold Dharma, or social order, for which he is entrusted with the rod of Danda (punishment).¹⁴ However, in the contemporary democratic landscape, the role of political leaders has evolved, and many now engage in hate speech, which goes against the core principles of the constitution. A project tracking hate

¹¹ From Philosophy to Practice: Buddha's Panchsheel in the Modern Diplomatic Arsenal of Small States, *available at*: https://gajrc.com/media/articles/GAJHSS_64_159-166.pdf (last visited on Jan. 20, 2025).

¹² Joint Press Statement on the Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation in Myanmar, *available at*: <https://www.state.gov/joint-press-statement-on-the-human-rights-and-humanitarian-situation-in-myanmar/> (last visited on Jan. 21, 2025).

¹³ A Nation's Betrayal: The Unfolding Tragedy Of Hindus In Bangladesh – Analysis, *available at*: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/08122024-a-nations-betrayal-the-unfolding-tragedy-of-hindus-in-bangladesh-analysis/> (last visited on Jan. 20, 2025).

¹⁴ O.P. GAUBA, INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT 17 (Mayur Paperbacks, Delhi, 1st edn, 2015).

crimes and hate speech across six northern Indian states since October 2021, The Wire's Heartland Hatewatch recorded 89 cases of such incidents in the months preceding the 2022 assembly elections, with a particular focus on Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, and Haryana. Although hate crimes slightly decreased in January, hate speech, especially from members of the ruling party, escalated in the lead-up to the elections. BJP MLA Nandkishor Gujar created controversy by using the communal slogan "Na Ali, na Bahubali, keval Bajrang Bali" at his rallies. BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra accused Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav of having a "fondness" for Pakistan and its founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Other inflammatory remarks included Amit Shah's reference to the debunked Kairana exodus and Yogi Adityanath's tweet likening supporters of Jinnah to those of Sardar Patel. Additionally, The Wire reported over 100 instances of dog-whistling in 34 speeches made by Yogi Adityanath.¹⁵

The Mahabharata, specifically in the Shanti Parva, outlines the principles of good governance. It states that rulers should be defenders and upholders of truth, maintaining discipline in their actions and following the policy of yogakshema (welfare of the people). Moreover, the text advises that questionable methods should only be employed in exceptional circumstances.¹⁶ However, problems arise when this principle is misinterpreted. These questionable methods are now often used for personal gain or gratification, such as the misuse of government agencies, the CBI, Pegasus, corruption, and the criminal backgrounds of politicians. In May 2013, amid various corruption scandals surrounding the UPA government, the Supreme Court made a remark about the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) that has since become associated with the agency. A Bench led by Justice R M Lodha described the CBI as "a caged parrot, speaking in its master's voice."¹⁷ Another fact in line is the release of beneficiaries allegedly exploiting the Roshni Act in Jammu & Kashmir has reignited the land scam, especially following the Jammu & Kashmir High Court's October 9, 2020. This ruling came nearly nine years after the initial petition in 2011, with previous court orders ignored. The Court found that the rules under the Roshni Act lacked legislative approval and enabled arbitrary

¹⁵ 89 Instances of Hate Crimes, Hate Speech Across Six North Indian States in Four Months, *available at*: <https://thewire.in/communalism/89-instances-of-hate-crimes-hate-speech-across-six-north-indian-states-in-four-months> (last visited on Jan. 21, 2025).

¹⁶ The Idea of Good Governance (With reference to Rajadhar-manushasana Parva of Shanti Parva), *available at*: <https://www.researchreinforcement.com/issue4/17.pdf> (last visited on Jan. 21, 2025).

¹⁷ Opposition leaders in CBI net: History of the struggle to secure agency's independence, *available at*: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/corruption-cases-the-cbis-uneasy-history-8160916/> (last visited on Jan. 21, 2025).

pricing, fostering nepotism. The Court also declared the 2007 Jammu and Kashmir State Lands Rules to be *ultra vires*.¹⁸ Furthermore, the latest analysis by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has revealed that 306 out of 763 sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, or 40%, have declared criminal cases against them, including serious charges such as murder and crimes against women. The ADR report further categorizes these criminal cases, noting that 194 MPs (25%) face serious charges, including murder, attempted murder, kidnapping, and crimes against women.¹⁹

IV. ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY: CORE IDEAS ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Surah Al Imran in the Quran highlights key traits of an ideal leader. A leader should be kind, as exemplified by the story of Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the Second Caliph of Islam. A deeply moving incident from the days of famine offers valuable lessons for rulers and all those in positions of authority. During a famine, Umar personally ensured no one in his city went hungry. One night, he discovered a starving family with children crying as their mother cooked stones to lull them to sleep. Feeling guilty, Umar fetched provisions from the Baitul Mal and delivered them himself. He assisted in preparing a meal, provided comfort to the family, and took accountability for their future well-being. The incident underscores Umar's humility, accountability, and commitment to his people.²⁰ In addition, a leader should be just, knowledgeable, and wise, using their wisdom to address day-to-day issues effectively. Humility and modesty are also vital qualities; for instance, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), despite being the leader of Muslims, lived a simple life, sleeping on a basic mattress with minimal comforts or decorations—an aspirational standard for any good leader. A striking example of the Prophet's consultative leadership was during the Battle of the Trench (Ghazwat al-Khandaq), mentioned in Chapter 33 of the Qur'an, "Al-Ahzab (The Confederates)." Facing a vastly larger enemy alliance, the Prophet sought advice from his Companions (shura). Salmān Al-Fārisi proposed digging a trench around Medina, a strategy the Prophet endorsed, leading to victory. Equally remarkable was his ability to balance authority with mercy, blending compassion with decisive leadership—an often-rare combination. Unfortunately, modern

¹⁸ Roshni Land Scam and Jammu & Kashmir High Court judgment explained, *available at*: <https://www.barandbench.com/columns/litigation-columns/roshni-land-scam-jammu-kashmir-high-court-judgment> (visited on Jan. 22, 2025).

¹⁹ Summary of 10 years of Election Watch, *available at*: <https://adrindia.org/content/139-bjp-leaders-49-congress-members-list-306-mps-facing-criminal-charges-adr-report> (last visited Jan. 22, 2025).

²⁰ A Touching Story of Umar (R.A) and the Poor Woman, *available at*: <https://islamhashtag.com/stories-of-umar/> (last visited on Jan. 23, 2025).

Muslim political leaders rarely embody the Qur'anic ideals of consultation, mercy, and forgiveness, often replacing them with authoritarianism and brutality. Examples include the persecution of minorities in Bangladesh, forced migration, Iranian absolutism, Taliban-led Afghanistan, and the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. These timeless principles, however, remain relevant across all spheres of life, including politics, work, and home.²¹ Additionally, a leader should have a profound sense of God-consciousness (taqwa) and demonstrate unwavering resolve in their decisions.

V. CONCLUSION

According to Marxist theory, religion is part of the superstructure, akin to political systems, which is determined by the economic base. In other words, the economic class uses religion to maintain dominance in society, which is why Karl Marx referred to religion as the “opium of the masses.” This is evident in Pakistan’s politics, where only selective interpretations of Islamic law are enforced, often ignoring others such as Sharia, Hadith, and Sunnah. For example, while there is public support for Islamic banking, insufficient efforts have been made by the government to implement it fully. Moreover, religion is often used strategically during elections to consolidate power, as seen when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto banned alcohol to gain political favor.²²

While religion offers valuable insights into ideal leadership, there are times when certain teachings may not align with modern realities. For example, the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia highlights such contrasts. Therefore, it is crucial to seek other sources to guide political leaders in ensuring effective governance. Prominent political philosophers, such as Plato’s idea of the philosopher-king, and exemplary leaders like Nelson Mandela, who advocated for mass amnesty, should be looked up to. Leaders should embrace constitutional morality and promote core values like liberty, equality, fraternity, and respect for human rights. Above all, a political leader must follow their inner conscience, as a political system cannot function effectively without moral values. Strict oversight alone is insufficient to prevent unethical conduct.

²¹ Leadership Qualities of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), *available at*: <https://islamicvoice.com/hadith/leadership-qualities-of-prophet-muhammad-pbuh/> (last visited on Jan. 23, 2025).

²² Islamic banking — need of the hour, *available at*: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/which-countries-have-the-term-islamic-republic-in-their-names.html#:~:text=The%20World%27s%20Four%20Islamic%20Republics%201%20Pakistan%20Despite,Revolution.%20...%203%20Afghanistan%20...%204%20Mauritania%20> (last visited on Jan. 23, 2025).

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