



Re-thinking Political Legitimacy through Matsyanyaya in the Mahabharata (Santi Parva) and Kamandaka's Nitisaara

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Abstract

Political legitimacy - the question of why people accept and obey authority - has been a persistent theme in political thought. Western traditions typically frame the problem through consent, contract, or procedural rationality: Hobbes and Locke describe political order as arising from an exchange of natural liberty for peace and security, while Weber distinguishes traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational bases of obedience. These frameworks, though influential, do not exhaust the ways political authority has been justified. Classical Indian political thought grounds legitimacy instead in the ruler's moral responsibility to sustain order, a condition captured by the metaphor of matsyanyaya, the "law of the fishes," in which the strong devour the weak in the absence of authority. This paper traces the evolution of that metaphor across two texts separated by genre and historical context - the Santi Parva of the Mahabharata and Kamandaka's Nitisaara - to recover an indigenous theory of legitimacy. Where the Santi Parva grounds kingship in dharma (moral duty), the Nitisaara reframes the same concern through niti (prudence and statecraft). Read together, the two texts yield what this paper calls "ethical realism": a model in which legitimacy is neither purely moral idealism nor pure pragmatism, but a continuously earned balance between virtue and competence. The paper situates this synthesis against Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Weber to clarify what is distinctive about the Indian model, while also noting the limits of treating dharma-based kingship as an uncomplicated ideal.

Keywords: Political Legitimacy, Matsyanyaya, Santi Parva, Kamandaka's Nitisaara, Comparative Political Theory

Introduction

Political legitimacy, the question of why people accept and obey authority, has been a persistent theme in political thinking. In the Western tradition, the problem is often framed through the language of consent and contract. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke described the beginnings of political order as the result of an understanding amongst people where some liberties were exchanged with a sovereign power in return for peace and security - though the two thinkers differ sharply on how far that exchange binds the ruler: Hobbes's sovereign holds near-absolute power once instituted, while Locke insists that government remains conditional on protecting life, liberty, and property, and forfeits legitimacy if it does not. In the later part of the 19th century, Max Weber distinguished between different types of authority - traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational - and analysed the institutional bases of obedience for each. These paradigms, while influential in the world today concerning the legitimacy of political order, do not

represent the whole world. With respect to Indian philosophy and political order, these paradigms fail to account for the moral and cosmological aspects of the justification of kingship and the conduct of the king for the order. While consent and procedural legality as bases of order are modern Western ideas, the Indian political order is based on the ruler's moral responsibility to create and maintain order. The classical metaphor that captures this condition is matsyanyaya, the "law of the fishes," wherein, in the absence of authority, the strong devour the weak. This imagery appears in several Sanskrit texts, but it acquires its richest political meaning in the Santi Parva of the Mahabharata and in Kamandaka's Nitisaara. Despite being written in different eras and genres, the two texts agree that kingship is morally justified when it stops such predation and upholds social order. However, they use different terminology and frameworks to convey this idea: Kamandaka's Nitisaara reframes it using niti (prudence, policy, and good governance), whereas the Santi Parva

speaks in terms of dharma (moral duty and justice).

Santi Parva forms the major philosophical reflection of the Mahabharata. After the Kurukshetra war, it documents the exchange between King Yudhiṣṭhira and the dying Bhīṣma, who refuses to rule out of guilt. Bhīṣma imparts rajadharma to Yudhiṣṭhira, arguing that a society without a ruler will devolve into matsyanyaya and entropy: the king must sustain, preserve, and uphold dharma to control anarchy. Bhīṣma's moral virtue, self-discipline, and political control are treated as equally important. In the Santi Parva, Bhīṣma lays emphasis on the king being "truthful, self-controlled, and devoted to the welfare of his subjects" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) [3]. The ethical dimension of power legitimises it morally and aligns it with dharma so that it preserves social order.

Kamandaka's Nitisara, composed several centuries later - between roughly the fourth and sixth centuries CE, once regional polities and the pressures of interstate rivalry had reshaped the political landscape - addresses the same underlying anxiety about matsyanyaya, but does so less through moral exhortation and more through the register of practical statecraft. The treatise explains how a ruler ought to choose advisors, manage intelligence and espionage, conduct military campaigns, and administer justice. Beneath this realism, however, lies a clear ethical vision: a legitimate ruler is one who acts with caution, moderation, and balance. The Nitisara thus incorporates the Santi Parva's moral reasoning into a practical framework. As Dutt's translation notes, Kamandaka describes the ideal king as one who "restrains his senses, consults the wise, and acts for the welfare of his people" (Dutt, 1896) [4]. The ruler's legitimacy rests on practical competence combined with moral restraint.

Both texts, though distinct in style and context, address the same foundational anxiety: how to justify authority without turning it into tyranny. By tracing the evolution of the matsyanyaya metaphor across these works, this paper uncovers an indigenous conception of legitimacy that combines moral duty and political realism. The Mahabharata grounds legitimacy in the preservation of dharma, while Kamandaka grounds it in prudential wisdom. Together they form a continuum of thought that resists the binary between idealism and realism, showing that for these Indian thinkers, moral responsibility and effective governance are inseparable.

This study thus aims to reinterpret the concept of political legitimacy by bringing these two classical sources into dialogue, situating their ideas within the intellectual history of India rather than reading them solely through Western theoretical categories. Methodologically, the paper adopts a comparative, text-based hermeneutic approach: it reads the primary texts closely in translation, treats the matsyanyaya metaphor as a shared conceptual anchor, and uses that anchor to trace both continuity and change in how legitimacy is theorised across genre and period. This is not intended as a philological or Sanskritological intervention - it does not offer new translation or textual-critical work - but as an exercise in comparative political theory, in the sense developed by scholars who read non-Western political texts as theoretical interlocutors rather than as objects of purely historical or anthropological interest. The paper proceeds by first analysing how the Santi Parva defines

legitimacy through dharma and the prevention of matsyanyaya; it then turns to Kamandaka's Nitisara to explore how *niti* redefines legitimacy in more pragmatic terms. It then compares these models and discusses how they differ from the dominant Western understandings of legitimacy based on consent, legality, or procedural rationality, before turning, in a final section, to the limits of treating this synthesis as an uncomplicated ideal. In doing so, it argues that these Indian texts present an "ethical realism" - a synthesis in which moral virtue and practical wisdom jointly constitute the foundation of rightful rule.

Matsyanyaya and the Moral Ground of Kingship in the Santi Parva

The Santi Parva of the Mahabharata represents one of the most elaborate discussions of political order in early Indian thought. Situated after the great war, the book opens with Yudhiṣṭhira's refusal to rule, haunted by guilt over the devastation the war has caused. The elder Bhīṣma, lying on his bed of arrows, becomes his teacher and counsellor, explaining that governance itself is a sacred duty. Bhīṣma begins not with divine right or the glory of kingship but with a sober observation about the human condition: when there is no king, "the strong devour the weak, as fishes in water devour the smaller ones" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) [3]. This striking image of matsyanyaya captures the fragility of social life and establishes the fundamental justification for rule. Without authority, chaos reigns; without moral restraint, power degenerates into predation. The metaphor is not merely descriptive - it functions as a political axiom and a moral warning. The natural order of strength preying on weakness stands opposed to dharma, the moral law that sustains the world. Hence, to prevent matsyanyaya is to restore and uphold dharma.

Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that kingship was instituted by the sages precisely to avert this condition of anarchy (Debroy, 2015) [3]. The ruler is not a possessor of privileges but a custodian whose duty is to maintain moral and social order. Authority is not earned through divine lineage, nor does it stem purely from popular sovereignty; it is earned through moral function and through the prevention of injustice and the protection of the weak. For Bhīṣma, the exercise of severity is a means through which order is maintained, yet it must always be exercised justly and with proportionality. Control is the lawful right of the ruler, and punishment is lawful, but must always serve a peace-making order rather than domination for its own sake.

His teaching contains the seeds of what might be called a dharma-based social contract, though it differs fundamentally from its Western counterpart. In the Hobbesian tradition, individuals give up their natural freedom to escape violence. In the Santi Parva, the sages institute kingship not through mutual agreement but through recognition of a cosmic necessity: without moral order, creation itself would perish. The king's obligation is thus not toward a people who consented, but toward the dharma that upholds all beings. Legitimacy emerges from the alignment of human governance with cosmic order, not from rational consent among equals.

The Santi Parva also redefines the relationship between morality and politics through the figure of the *rajaṛṣi*, the "sage-king." Bhīṣma insists that the ruler must be both

powerful and self-restrained, capable of wielding *daṇḍa* yet governed by wisdom: "A king who rules according to dharma is equal to a thousand sacrifices; by protecting his subjects, he attains heaven" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. The connection between political order and moral merit is direct - legitimacy of power depends not on effectiveness alone but on the ruler's moral disposition. Hiltebeitel (2001) ^[5] calls this the "education of the dharma-king," through which Yudhiṣṭhira learns that renunciation and reign are simultaneously moral actions. This aspect of moral education is vital to the Indian perspective on the right to rule: inner moral discipline is expected as a precondition for holding that right at all.

The Santi Parva deals with the question of proportionate punishment quite frequently. Bhīṣma explains that extreme leniency is just as dangerous as extreme cruelty - a ruler who unjustly punishes his subjects creates a situation in which his subjects hold him in contempt, while a ruler who will not punish creates a situation in which disorder reigns (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 9) ^[3]. The sense of legitimacy is therefore connected to equilibrium and fairness; the ruler is expected to exercise coercion solely to maintain social cohesion. This idea of coercive equilibrium bears comparison with modern theories of the "moral limits of coercive state power," where the just ruler is defined by restraint rather than by the scale of coercive capacity.

The text also associates legitimacy with the king's obligation to welfare (*prajā-hita*). Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that the king's highest duty is to ensure the happiness of his subjects; only by promoting their welfare does he preserve his own kingdom (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. The ruler's well-being is thus inseparable from that of his people. Political power is justified only when it serves the collective good, collapsing the boundary between moral and administrative duties and making welfare itself a measure of legitimacy. The Santi Parva, then, conceptualises legitimacy as a moral performance rather than a legal status. The ruler must constantly act in accordance with dharma - through just punishment, self-discipline, and concern for the public good - and a king who fails in these respects loses legitimacy even if he retains power. Unrighteous kingship leads to catastrophe, while morally grounded rule restores cosmic balance. Bhīṣma's instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira is therefore not abstract philosophy but a political pedagogy - a guide for turning power into righteousness.

What emerges from this section of the epic is a sophisticated moral philosophy of political legitimacy. The justification of rule lies in moral responsibility, not conquest or inheritance. The king's authority derives from his duty to prevent *matsyanyaya*, his capacity for restraint, and his commitment to welfare. The Santi Parva thus offers a model of governance that is simultaneously ethical and realist: it recognises the necessity of coercive power but confines it within moral limits, presenting legitimacy as an active equilibrium between power and morality that every ruler must continually achieve. The Mahabharata, in short, provides a foundational framework for understanding Indian political legitimacy: the moral obligation to sustain order in a world where power, if unchecked, turns destructive. The king's legitimacy is tested not by birth or the consent of subjects but by his ability to transform coercive power into

moral protection - a principle that links cosmic harmony with political justice (Debroy, 2015; Hiltebeitel, 2001) ^[3, 5].

Kamandaka's Nitisara: Prudence and the Rearticulation of Legitimate Rule

Kamandaka's Nitisara, "The Essence of Polity," stands as one of the most systematic expositions of statecraft in early Indian political thought. Although often overshadowed by Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra, the Nitisara deserves attention as a text that bridges moral philosophy and practical governance. Kamandaka wrote in a period of political transition, when small and medium kingdoms competed after the decline of the Mauryan empire, and his work reflects a need to balance moral ideals with the realities of diplomacy and administration. Like the Santi Parva, Kamandaka begins from the problem of *matsyanyaya*: without rule, chaos prevails. Yet his focus lies not on the moral origin of kingship but on the skills and prudence by which legitimate kingship is sustained. Legitimacy, in this text, is a matter of competence guided by ethics - what might be called the politics of *niti*.

Niti as Prudential Wisdom

The word *niti* in Kamandaka's usage carries a rich range of meanings - policy, morality, and prudence. The Nitisara repeatedly praises rulers who possess *naya*, the capacity to make correct judgments in varying circumstances. Its opening chapter sets the tone: "The king who restrains his senses, associates with wise ministers, and acts after deliberation, secures both the prosperity of the state and his own happiness" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Legitimacy here depends on the ruler's mastery of prudence, self-control, strategic foresight, and measured conduct. Whereas Bhīṣma in the Santi Parva emphasised inner virtue as a moral foundation, Kamandaka redefines that virtue as a set of rational habits that make governance stable. This shift in vocabulary from dharma to *niti* signals a new conception of legitimacy: dharma connotes an eternal moral order, while *niti* refers to the art of applying principles in changing political contexts. The legitimate ruler, therefore, is not a passive moral exemplar but an active statesman capable of adapting to circumstances while preserving ethical restraint - in effect, Kamandaka transforms the moral king of the epic into an intelligent practitioner of policy.

Procedural Legitimacy: Counsel and Deliberation

One of Kamandaka's enduring contributions is his emphasis on consultation and procedure. He insists that no ruler can govern alone: ministers, counsellors, and spies are necessary instruments of good government, but their use must follow order and reason. "He who disregards the counsel of the wise and acts by caprice ruins both himself and his kingdom" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Legitimacy is therefore inseparable from process - a ruler who acts rashly loses the moral and practical grounds of authority. Kamandaka's proceduralism, his insistence on deliberation before action, marks an important departure from purely autocratic models; by embedding legitimacy in institutional routine, he transforms the king's ethical duty into a framework of rational administration. The Nitisara devotes substantial space to the qualities and selection of ministers, who must

be "learned, loyal, courageous, and self-restrained" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. The ruler's legitimacy depends partly on surrounding himself with such men, since good counsel ensures decisions that protect the realm from injustice and disorder. The underlying principle is that right governance arises from collective prudence rather than individual charisma: the king, though supreme, is legitimate only when he listens to wisdom and acts after due deliberation.

Ethical Restraint and the Use of Force

Although Kamandaka accepts that coercion (daṇḍa) is essential to maintain order, he warns against its excessive or impulsive use. "Punishment is the rod of protection; when wielded with measure it sustains the world, but when perverted it destroys the wielder himself" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. This sentence echoes Bhīṣma's insistence on proportional punishment in the Santi Parva, showing continuity between moral and prudential thought. Kamandaka regards the disciplined use of daṇḍa as both an ethical and practical requirement: a ruler who punishes unjustly creates fear and instability, while a ruler who neglects to punish invites matsyanyaya. Legitimate authority thus lies in moderation - force guided by wisdom. This approach may be described as ethical pragmatism: every policy decision involves balancing moral principles and practical outcomes, and the legitimate ruler succeeds not only because he uses power effectively but because his power is tempered by self-restraint. Kamandaka cautions against both cruelty and indulgence, advising that "the king should neither oppress nor spoil his subjects, for the ruin of the people is the ruin of the king" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Legitimacy, then, has an instrumental dimension: it is proven in the welfare and stability that prudent rule produces.

Diplomacy and Welfare: The Practical Ends of Legitimacy

Kamandaka also extends the discussion of legitimacy beyond domestic governance to interstate relations. His sections on alliance-building, treaties, and espionage demonstrate that a legitimate king must protect his realm through intelligence and diplomacy rather than constant warfare. A ruler who acts rashly in foreign policy undermines the security of his subjects and, therefore, his moral right to rule. "Peace secured by prudence is better than victory obtained by chance," he observes (Dutt, 1896) ^[4] - a statement that encapsulates his principle that stable welfare, not conquest, is the proper aim of kingship. Equally significant is his attention to economic administration and public welfare: Kamandaka prescribes that the ruler ensure "the protection of the productive classes, the maintenance of irrigation, and the prevention of famine" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Such measures are not only administrative but ethical, expressing the ruler's commitment to loka-saṅgraha, the sustenance of the community. The welfare of subjects becomes both the proof and the purpose of legitimate rule: a king who enriches his people strengthens his moral claim to obedience, while one who neglects them forfeits legitimacy even if he retains power.

Taken together, these teachings show that Kamandaka grounds legitimacy in competence balanced by virtue. The ruler's right to command is earned through wisdom, prudence, and fairness in the use of power. Kamandaka's

concern is less with the metaphysical source of authority and more with the daily practice of rule - but this practical focus does not make his theory amoral; rather, it translates moral ideals into administrative capacities. The just ruler is one whose intelligence, restraint, and concern for public welfare prevent the recurrence of matsyanyaya. Kamandaka's tone differs from Kauṭilya's: where the Arthaśāstra often presents a starker realism of control and surveillance, the Nitisara softens realism with ethical moderation. Kangle (1960) ^[7] later described Kamandaka's statecraft as "a more humanised form of realism," combining efficiency with moral awareness. His legitimacy is thus not Machiavellian but moral-pragmatic: it emerges when political success coincides with ethical rightness.

The Nitisara's conception of legitimacy can be summarised through three interrelated principles (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]: self-restraint, where the king's internal discipline legitimises his external authority; deliberation, where sound governance requires wise counsel and procedural regularity; and welfare, where the happiness of subjects is the ultimate test of just rule. Each principle directly addresses the problem of matsyanyaya by curbing arbitrariness, securing order, and promoting the collective good. In Kamandaka's reasoning, political legitimacy is neither divinely ordained nor democratically delegated; it is earned and maintained through the continuous exercise of prudence and justice. In sum, Kamandaka's Nitisara reframes the moral kingship of the Santi Parva into a code of prudent governance. It retains the ethical heart of Indian political thought - the prevention of predation and the pursuit of welfare - but articulates it through practical reason. The legitimate ruler is one who combines wisdom with moderation, ensuring that power serves order rather than domination (Dutt, 1896) ^[4].

Comparing the Two Texts: Continuities and Shifts

When the Santi Parva and Kamandaka's Nitisara are read together, a striking continuity of political reasoning becomes visible. Both texts begin from the same premise: in the absence of authority, social life descends into matsyanyaya, a state of predation in which the strong exploit the weak. From this shared anxiety emerges a vision of kingship as a moral and practical necessity. Yet despite this common foundation, each text articulates legitimacy through a different conceptual language: the Santi Parva presents legitimacy as the fulfilment of dharma, while the Nitisara translates that moral demand into the pragmatic idiom of niti. Together they trace a historical and conceptual movement in Indian political thinking - from ethical idealism to ethical realism.

Both Bhīṣma and Kamandaka understand power as instrumental, not self-justifying. In the Santi Parva, Bhīṣma's warning - "in the absence of a king, the strong devour the weak as fishes devour the small" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3] - captures the sense that kingship exists to check the destructive potential of unregulated power. Kamandaka expresses a parallel concern: "The king who guards the people from harm and maintains the rod of punishment with justice sustains the world" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Both passages express the same normative aim: political authority is justified only when it functions as protection, not domination. The continuity between the two texts also lies in their treatment of daṇḍa, the king's coercive power. Both

see punishment as indispensable to social stability, yet both restrict its use by moral principle. Bhīṣma cautions that disproportionate punishment turns daṇḍa into tyranny (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 9) ^[3]; Kamandaka echoes this concern when he states that punishment "wielded with measure sustains the world, but when perverted destroys the wielder himself" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Legitimacy thus rests on the ruler's ability to balance coercion and justice - an equilibrium between force and morality that defines the ethical dimension of Indian political realism.

Despite this common ground, the two works diverge in their frameworks for legitimising authority. The Santi Parva grounds legitimacy in cosmic morality: dharma is the ultimate criterion for right rule, and the king must internalise virtue, practise self-control, and act as the earthly embodiment of dharma. As Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira, "A king who governs according to dharma secures the happiness of all creatures" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. In this model, legitimacy is moral and transcendental - the ruler's alignment with dharma connects human society to cosmic order. Kamandaka, by contrast, brings this transcendental ideal into the sphere of political practice: his focus shifts from the being of the righteous king to the doing of the prudent ruler. Niti becomes the art of realising moral purposes through calculated means. The Nitisara's concern with ministerial selection, espionage, and diplomacy (Dutt, 1896) ^[4] reflects a world where legitimacy depends not on moral purity alone but on the ruler's ability to manage complexity. The transformation from dharma to niti marks an intellectual adaptation to changing political circumstances - an early recognition that ethical governance requires both virtue and competence.

The difference between the two texts also appears in form and tone. The Santi Parva, as part of a grand epic, teaches through moral dialogue, parable, and persuasion, seeking to shape the ruler's character. The Nitisara, by contrast, reads as a concise manual of governance addressed to the ruler's intellect. The Mahabharata appeals to conscience; Kamandaka appeals to reason. Yet this difference in genre reinforces, rather than erases, their shared goal: transforming political power into moral service. Both texts conceive the king as a guardian whose legitimacy derives from disciplined power exercised for the good of the realm. When the teachings of Bhīṣma and Kamandaka are brought together, a synthesis results - what this paper terms ethical realism. In both, legitimacy is based on the ruler's success in preventing matsyanyaya, but that success is measured by moral and practical criteria alike. The Santi Parva contributes the moral telos, the purpose of rule as the protection of dharma, while the Nitisara provides the prudential method, the means by which that protection is achieved. A ruler who is virtuous but lacks prudence fails to protect his people; a prudent ruler who is immoral becomes a tyrant. Legitimacy consists in the balance between the two.

This continuity between the epic and the manual demonstrates that Indian political thought evolved without abandoning its ethical foundation. The Nitisara does not reject the moral universe of the Mahabharata; it operationalises it. Both texts teach that power without justice leads to destruction, and justice without power remains ineffectual. By translating dharma into niti,

Kamandaka preserves the essence of Bhīṣma's teaching while adapting it to a more pragmatic age, showing that the moral purpose of politics can survive within the strategic realities of governance. Together, the Santi Parva and the Nitisara offer a continuous theory of political legitimacy rooted in moral order and realised through prudent action. The movement from dharma to niti does not represent a decline from idealism to realism but a maturation of thought - a recognition that moral legitimacy must be embodied in the practice of governance (Debroy, 2015; Dutt, 1896) ^[3, 4].

Indigenous Categories of Legitimacy

Unlike modern Western political vocabulary, early Indian texts do not use a single term equivalent to "political legitimacy." Instead, legitimacy is expressed through a constellation of interrelated concepts - dharma, daṇḍa, niti, naya, and loka-saṅgraha - each representing a dimension of rightful authority. Together, these categories outline a moral and practical framework that defines when and how political power is justified.

Dharma: The Moral Foundation of Rule

Dharma is the highest standard for valid authority in the Santi Parva. All beings are sustained by dharma, according to Bhīṣma, and a king who upholds it "protects the world and earns merit equal to a thousand sacrifices" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. Dharma in this context refers to both social order and moral law; it outlines the duty of the ruler to maintain stability, justice, and well-being. When the king's actions follow this universal rule, legitimacy results. The Mahabharata thus equates political power with moral obligation: the king's right to rule stems from his obligation to uphold dharma, not from ancestry or divine approval.

Daṇḍa: The Power to Protect

The coercive aspect of legitimacy is represented by daṇḍa, the authority to punish. Daṇḍa is regarded as necessary but morally limited by both Bhīṣma and Kamandaka. According to Kamandaka, "punishment, when applied properly, sustains the world, but when misused, it destroys the wielder" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Bhīṣma similarly cautions that disproportionate punishment is unjust and destabilising (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 9) ^[3]. Daṇḍa thus serves as a two-edged principle: it is the tool that keeps matsyanyaya at bay, but if separated from moral restraint, it loses its legitimacy. The ethical control of force is a hallmark of legitimate governance, since the rightful ruler uses daṇḍa for protection rather than domination.

Niti and Naya: Prudence and Practical Wisdom

Kamandaka's preferred categories, niti and naya, extend the moral logic of dharma into the practical domain of statecraft. Niti signifies right policy and good governance; naya denotes discretion and tactical intelligence. Kamandaka praises the ruler who "restrains his senses, listens to wise counsel, and acts for the welfare of his subjects" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Through these terms, legitimacy becomes performative - demonstrated through good judgment, fair administration, and prudent policy. Niti transforms moral kingship into effective governance, preserving ethical ends while adapting them to political realities.

Loka-saṅgraha: The Welfare of the Realm

Underlying both texts is the principle of loka-saṅgraha, the protection and cohesion of the world. Though not always named directly, this ideal guides both Bhīṣma's and Kamandaka's thought. A legitimate ruler sustains not only order but also the material and moral welfare of his people. Kamandaka's instructions on preventing famine and protecting productive classes (Dutt, 1896) ^[4] embody this ethos, just as Bhīṣma's insistence that the king's happiness lies in the happiness of his subjects (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3] translates welfare into a political duty. Loka-saṅgraha thus provides the teleological goal of legitimacy: political authority exists to secure collective well-being.

Synthesis: Legitimacy as Ethical and Functional Balance

Taken together, these terms construct an indigenous vocabulary of legitimacy grounded in moral order and pragmatic competence. Dharma gives authority its ethical core; daṇḍa provides its enforcement; niti and naya supply the prudential means; and loka-saṅgraha defines its ultimate purpose. Legitimate power, in this sense, is that which harmonises all four dimensions - moral, coercive, practical, and welfare-oriented. The ruler's right to govern is continually validated by his success in maintaining this balance.

Differences from Western Notions of Political Legitimacy

When examined against the major frameworks of Western political thought, the concept of legitimacy found in the Santi Parva and Kamandaka's Nitisara reveals both convergence and striking divergence. Like Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau, the Indian texts are deeply concerned with the problem of disorder and the need for authority. Yet they ground the solution not in a social contract or collective consent but in moral obligation and cosmic order. The differences are not merely terminological; they reflect contrasting ontologies of society, power, and morality.

Legitimacy Beyond Consent: Hobbes, Locke, and Matsyanyaya

The most immediate comparison is with Thomas Hobbes's account of political order in *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes famously describes the "state of nature" as a condition where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," prompting rational individuals to surrender their freedom to a sovereign for peace. The imagery of Hobbes's anarchy closely parallels the Indian metaphor of matsyanyaya, where "the big fish devours the small" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. Both metaphors articulate the same fear of unrestrained conflict and justify the emergence of rule as the remedy. However, their conceptual underpinnings diverge profoundly. In Hobbes's view, legitimacy arises from consent: individuals collectively authorise the sovereign's power, and that authorisation, once given, is close to irrevocable - Hobbes's sovereign commands obedience regardless of virtue, and authority remains legitimate even if exercised harshly, so long as it maintains peace. Locke offers a partial corrective within the Western tradition itself: for Locke, government is legitimate only so long as it protects natural rights, and a ruler who violates that trust

may justly be resisted. This conditional quality brings Locke closer than Hobbes to the Indian model, where moral failure invalidates political right. Yet even Locke's conditionality is ultimately grounded in a rights-bearing individual's prior consent, whereas in the Mahabharata, legitimacy arises from duty: sages institute kingship to maintain dharma and protect the weak, not by compact but by moral necessity (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. Bhīṣma's king loses legitimacy when he acts unjustly, even if he keeps order - moral failure invalidates political right independent of any prior agreement. Thus, while Hobbes's *Leviathan* represents rationalised fear transformed into authority, and Locke's commonwealth represents conditional trust revocable by the governed, Bhīṣma's ruler embodies righteousness as the very source of legitimate power. The difference turns on moral rather than contractual grounds: in Indian thought, legitimacy depends not on the people's consent - whether absolute, as in Hobbes, or conditional, as in Locke - but on the ruler's conformity to dharma.

Weber and the Question of Authority

Max Weber's typology of traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority offers another useful comparison. At first glance, the Mahabharata's king may seem a "traditional" ruler, legitimised by custom and lineage. Yet Bhīṣma's teaching clearly transcends lineage: it is the moral fulfilment of rajadharma, not birth, that grants legitimacy (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. The Nitisara, in turn, emphasises competence, deliberation, and bureaucratic order, resembling aspects of Weber's "legal-rational" type. Still, neither text fits neatly into Weber's scheme, because both insist that legitimacy is simultaneously moral and practical. Authority cannot be purely traditional, rational, or charismatic; it must combine all three in the person of the ruler whose virtue and wisdom justify command. Kamandaka's insistence on procedural correctness - "He who disregards the counsel of the wise and acts by caprice ruins his kingdom" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4] - suggests a proto-rational understanding of rule. Yet the basis of obedience remains ethical, not bureaucratic: the ruler must act for prajā-hita, the welfare of the people (Dutt, 1896) ^[4]. Subjects obey because the ruler's conduct visibly serves justice and welfare, not because an impersonal law commands them.

Rousseau and the Moral Foundation of Sovereignty

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* (1762), proposes that legitimate authority must rest on the "general will," the collective moral will of the community. Here again we find a partial resonance: Bhīṣma's concept of dharma expresses a universal moral order that transcends individual interests, somewhat like Rousseau's general will. Yet the grounding differs - it is cosmic, not civic. For Rousseau, moral order emerges from collective agreement; for Bhīṣma, it pre-exists in the structure of the universe. The king does not create dharma through legislation; he restores and protects it. Legitimacy, therefore, does not arise from human will but from the alignment of human governance with eternal law (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3]. Kamandaka echoes this idea in secularised form, instructing the ruler to "act after deliberation for the good of the realm" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4], implying a duty to the public interest rather than personal desire. This shared orientation toward moral

purpose separates the Indian notion of legitimacy from modern democratic consent: it is not the act of agreement that makes power rightful, but the ruler's commitment to welfare and justice as intrinsic goods.

Moral Obligation versus Procedural Rationality

In modern Western theories, particularly post-Enlightenment liberalism, legitimacy is often tied to law enforcement, popular representation, or rational-legal authority. The Mahabharata and Nitisara, by contrast, base legitimacy on moral duty and prudential wisdom (niti); neither reduces authority to inner virtue alone or to practical intelligence alone, and both reject the notion that authority is legitimised only through formal legality or abstract consent. Legitimacy is instead continually earned by ethical practice and welfare-oriented policy. Hiltebeitel (2001) ^[5] notes that the Mahabharata functions as a "pedagogy of moral kingship," in which the ruler is educated into, rather than simply granted, the justification for his authority - a pedagogy that extends into governance through administrative practice as much as through moral principle. Together, these texts suggest a definition of political legitimacy as ethical practice rather than procedural status.

Two Traditions of Justifying Power

In sum, the distinction between Indian and Western notions of legitimacy is especially evident in their understanding of the relationship between authority, law, and morality. In the Western tradition running from Hobbes through Locke, legitimacy is typically derived from the governed, whether through absolute or conditional consent; in the Santi Parva and Nitisara, it is derived from duty and the preservation of dharma. Both texts see authority as neither an artefact of voluntary agreement nor a purely functional response to disorder, but as an ethical necessity grounded in cosmic and social order. Legitimacy is judged by the moral virtue of the ruler and his commitment to the welfare of his subjects, not by legality, consent, or institutional form. Where Western political thought treats the state as an artefact of human agreement instituted to secure peace, the Santi Parva and Nitisara treat it as a moral institution instituted to protect dharma and justice. The two traditions also diverge in how they treat the failure of rule: for Hobbes, a sovereign who maintains peace remains legitimate regardless of virtue; for Bhīṣma and Kamandaka, legitimacy ends the moment righteousness is lost, even if the external order continues to function. These differences reveal a deeper philosophical divergence: where the Western tradition locates legitimacy in rational consent and institutional design, the Indian texts locate it in an ethical practice anchored in the moral integrity of rulers and prudential wisdom. The Santi Parva and Nitisara thus articulate a vision of legitimate rule as a moral code - one that constantly seeks to link power to justice, placing power in the service of protecting the weak and maintaining order (Debroy, 2015; Dutt, 1896; Hiltebeitel, 2001) ^[3, 4, 5].

The Limits of the Dharma-Niti Synthesis

Before turning to the paper's wider implications, it is worth being explicit about what this ethical-realist synthesis leaves unresolved, since presenting it as an unqualified ideal would understate real tensions within the tradition itself. First,

dharma in the Santi Parva is not a neutral or universal ethical standard: it is articulated within, and presupposes, the varṇa order, in which duties and entitlements are distributed unequally according to social station. A theory of legitimacy that rests on the king's fidelity to dharma is, therefore, also a theory that legitimises the hierarchy dharma encodes, and the Santi Parva's promise of "protection of the weak" needs to be read alongside this structural qualification rather than as a straightforward anticipation of modern egalitarian welfare. Second, both texts are addressed to and about kings; the question of legitimacy they pose is a question about monarchical rule specifically, and does not engage the gaṇa-saṅgha or "republican" polities known from other strands of ancient Indian political history, nor the more sceptical treatments of daṇḍa and kingship found in early Buddhist literature. The dharma-niti synthesis described here is best understood as one influential strand of ancient Indian political thought rather than as its single, representative core. Third, the figure of the legitimate ruler in both texts is implicitly and exclusively male, and the welfare of subjects is discussed in terms that do not engage gender as a category of analysis at all. None of this undermines the paper's central comparative claim - that the Santi Parva and Nitisara construct a coherent, non-contractarian theory of legitimacy - but a responsible account of that theory should name its social location rather than present it as a universal or fully egalitarian model of just rule.

Wider Implications and Contemporary Resonances

Beyond historical interest, revisiting the Santi Parva and Kamandaka's Nitisara as sources of political legitimacy carries wider implications. These writings offer conceptual tools for understanding the long-standing connection between governance, power, and morality in India's intellectual heritage; they do more than simply recount the history of ancient kingship. Reading them together allows for the recovery of a native vocabulary of legitimacy, one that integrates welfare, ethics, and prudence as essential components of just governance.

Decolonising the Study of Political Thought

Modern scholarship on political legitimacy often begins from Western definitions - contract, sovereignty, legality, and rights. Applied uncritically to Indian texts, these frameworks risk distorting their meaning. The Santi Parva and Nitisara invite a different approach: they compel us to understand authority through the logic of dharma and niti, rather than contract or legality. This does not imply that Indian thought rejects reason or institutions, but that it situates them within an ethical cosmology. As Hiltebeitel (2001) ^[5] notes, the Mahabharata is not simply a mythological narrative but a systematic reflection on the moral education of rulers. Recentring such texts allows political theory to move beyond imported paradigms and to articulate categories rooted in India's own intellectual history. This reorientation carries a decolonial significance: to study dharma and niti on their own terms is to challenge the assumption that legitimacy must always be understood through the lens of European modernity, and to correct colonial-era misreadings of Indian political texts as either purely moralistic or entirely despotic. The Santi Parva and

Nitisara show that Indian thinkers were keenly aware of the tension between ethics and pragmatism, and that their goal was to harmonise, rather than separate, the two.

Ethical Realism and Contemporary Governance

The ethical realism of these texts remains relevant to today's political climate. Political discourse in India frequently evaluates leaders by their perceived moral character and dedication to the common good, in addition to their legality - a pattern consistent with the long-standing expectation, traceable to the tradition of dharma-rajya, of a polity governed by morality. The Mahabharata's claim that "the king's pride lies in the happiness of his subjects" (Debroy, 2015, Vol. 8) ^[3] is echoed in contemporary notions of political responsibility and welfare, just as Kamandaka's insistence that leaders "act for the good of their people" (Dutt, 1896) ^[4] foreshadows the idea of development as a moral obligation rather than merely a successful policy outcome. In Indian public discourse, criticism of corruption or misuse of office frequently takes on a moral register that implies a violation of dharma in addition to a violation of law - illustrating a long-standing entanglement of moral behaviour and lawful authority in the popular understanding of political legitimacy. This is offered here as an illustrative continuity in political vocabulary and public rhetoric, not as an empirical claim requiring its own separate evidentiary base; a fuller treatment of this contemporary resonance would be a natural extension of the present study rather than a claim this paper attempts to establish on its own.

Toward a Comparative Political Theory

Finally, the comparative analysis of these texts expands the field of political theory itself. Incorporating the Indian concepts of dharma, niti, and daṇḍa into the inquiry of legitimacy broadens our understanding of how societies across history have legitimised power. These categories serve as a reminder that legitimacy is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by philosophy and culture, rather than a single universal logic. Effective governance and moral responsibility are complementary, not mutually exclusive, as the Santi Parva and Nitisara teach - an observation with continuing relevance to present-day discussions of ethics in governance. The ongoing study of these texts helps restore the moral dimension of politics to its proper place. Legitimacy, as conceived by Bhīṣma and Kamandaka, is not static but performative: it must be enacted daily through just, wise, and compassionate rule. Their teachings offer a durable reminder that power devoid of morality is self-defeating, and morality without effective power is impotent. The art of legitimate rule lies in uniting the two.

Conclusion

Together, Kamandaka's Nitisara and the Mahabharata's Santi Parva provide a distinctive and profound account of political legitimacy. Both begin with the understanding that when there is no authority, society devolves into matsyanyaya, the law of the fishes, in which the powerful prey on the weak. Power must exist to prevent this, but it can only be legitimately exercised when guided by moral principle and sound judgment. Dharma, the moral code binding ruler and subject in a moral relationship, is the foundation of legitimacy in the Santi Parva; niti, the

practical intelligence that allows the ruler to govern successfully while upholding justice, is how Kamandaka rearticulates legitimacy in the Nitisara. Together, these texts combine moral obligation and practical skill into an indigenous theory of legitimacy this paper has termed ethical realism, in which the ruler's authority is justified by his ability to balance power with justice, restraint, and welfare - rather than by divine right or popular consent. Legitimacy, in this account, is a living moral practice, consistently earned through ethical conduct and prudent governance, in contrast to Western models built on social contract or procedural legality. At the same time, as the discussion above makes clear, this synthesis is a historically situated one - addressed to kings, articulated within a hierarchical social order, and silent on gender - and should be read as a significant strand of ancient Indian political thought rather than as its sole or fully representative voice. Read with that qualification in view, re-examining these treatises still allows us to rediscover an intellectual tradition that refuses to divorce politics from ethics. The king's task, as Bhīṣma and Kamandaka both affirm, is to transform coercive force into moral protection. In that transformation lies the enduring meaning of political legitimacy in Indian thought: a vision in which the prevention of matsyanyaya becomes the highest expression of justice.

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