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# The Civilisation of Harmony and Caring



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES CHENNAI

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# India Lives in Harmony with All Creation

India is blessed with the richest lands in the world, enclosed within perhaps the securest geographical frontiers on earth. Notwithstanding the great expanse of her lands, geographically India has the attributes of a fabulous island. It is therefore not surprising that Indians, living securely within their vast and fertile lands for millennia without fear of external aggression or internal scarcity, developed into a homogenous civilisational area. This homogeneous civilisation of India is anchored in the *sanatana dharma*. Living in their splendid and rich isolation, Indians have been at peace with themselves, with nature, and with the world. The *sanatana dharma* enshrines, at its heart, a sense of deep respect for all aspects of creation. This respect for all creation and the urge to live in harmony with all is the defining characteristic of *sanatana dharma*, and therefore, of Indian-ness.



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## India Sees Unity and Order in All

The deep-seated Indian sense of respect for all creation is anchored in and flows from the Indian view of the Universe as a manifestation of Brahman. Brahman manifests Himself into varied forms of the Universe, and then at the end of a *yuga*, at the end of the current cycle of creation, contracts these manifestations back into Himself. The Universe thus is a mere play of Brahman, a cosmic game of repeated manifestation and retraction of the ultimate essence of the Universe. But it is a play that proceeds according to well-defined cycles of time. Universe is play, but the play is not arbitrary. Even Brahman is governed by Kala. He manifests and retracts according to a definite flow of time that even he cannot transcend.

Every Indian is aware of the Indian view of the World as play of Brahman, and of the supremacy of Kala in this play. Every Indian thus is imbued with a sense of responsible kinship with all aspects of creation, with an awareness of divinity in all sentient and insentient beings, that needs to be not only respected and worshipped but also nurtured and cared for according to the exigencies of the times.

Others have seen gross idolatry in this Indian way of seeing divinity in creation. Indians see in this the only possible way of responsible living on earth.



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## Sharing and Caring is the Essence of Indian-ness

Knowing and believing in the essential unity of all creation, the Indians have exalted the responsibility of taking care of all aspects of creation to the level of an inviolable discipline of human life. *Sanatana Dharma* enjoins upon every responsible and capable householder to take out appropriate shares for all aspects of creation that fall within his care, to assuage the hunger of all before sitting down to eat for himself. Those who fail to care and share thus are, from the Indian civilisational perspective, no better than thieves. Sri Krishna Himself has taught the Indians that whatever we obtain is obtained through the graciousness of different aspects of creation, and anyone who enjoys what he obtains, without sharing it with all the others, is indeed a thief. *Tairdattan-apradayaibhyo yo bhunkte stena eva sah*. And *Isopanishad* teaches them that whatever there is in the Universe is pervaded by Him, and therefore one may partake of whatever he gets only after sharing it with others: *tena tyaktena bhunjithah*.



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## India Cares for Her Own

...Time and again the mourners for Diana and Mother Teresa will say, "Nobody cares, but she cared." This is not only untrue in the rich world but also in India. Begging can only be a huge industry in India because people give. A sannyasi can walk from one end of the Subcontinent to the other, with nothing but a loincloth, his staff and a begging bowl, because people will share what little they have with him. In the shabby lanes of urban Bombay at suppertime you may see scores of poor men sitting on the pavements outside restaurants waiting for their free meal of rice and dahl, cooked for them by the restaurant, paid for by the client.

...If the cult of Christian Mother Teresa is fed by contempt for Hindu India, it must do more evil than good. However many people are helped by Mother Teresa and her nuns, there are close to a billion others who will continue to be unfairly judged as unable or unwilling to take care of their own.

—*Germain Greer, 1997 AD*

The nobles and householders of this country have founded hospitals within the city, to which the poor of all countries, the destitute, cripples and the diseased, may repair. They receive every kind of requisite help gratuitously. Physicians inspect their diseases, and according to their cases, order them food and drink, medicine or decoctions, everything in fact that may contribute to their ease. When cured they depart at their ease.

—*Fa-Hian on Magadha, 400 AD*



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# The *Grihastha* forms the Foundation of Society

Indian civilisation has not only comprehended the essence of the Universe; it has also evolved a social order appropriate for leading life in conformity with that comprehension. The Indian social organisation is thus as peculiarly Indian as the larger Indian view of the Universe.

The primary responsibility of caring for all aspects of creation in the Indian civilisational perspective is placed upon the *grihastha*, the responsible and capable householder. The Mahabharata says that hundreds and thousands of moving and unmoving creatures in the Universe live off what the *grihastha* earns through his righteous actions; and the kings, ministers, soldiers and scholars all depend upon the *grihastha* for their sustenance.

The *grihastha*, the householder along with his family, and not the individual, forms the basic unit of Indian social, economic and moral order.



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# Woman is the Centre of the Household

The social, economic and moral responsibilities of the *grihastha* are discharged by all members of the household jointly. But the woman, in the Indian civilisational perspective, is central to the household. Mahabharata says that the woman is the household. The Vedas say that she is the queen of the household. And, Manu says that a household begins with marriage, and that the basic duty of the householder of sharing before eating is to be performed by the *dampati*, by the man and the wife together.

The centrality of woman in an Indian household is brought out poignantly by Draupadi's description of her role in the Pandava household. The exalted place of the woman in the Indian household, and consequently in the Indian social, economic and moral order has remained unchanged over time. An early nineteenth century document from Thanjavur describes how the queens of the household undertake feeding of great multitudes in almost the same way as Draupadi of Mahabharata. And Indian women even today take upon themselves the primary responsibility of ensuring the economic, social and moral well-being of the household.





## Draupadi-Satyabhama Samvada

In the Vanaparva of Mahabharata, Draupadi describes to Satyabhama her role in the Pandava household thus:

I perform *bhiksha*, *bali* and *sraddha*, the daily giving of food for different aspects of the Universe; I undertake *sthalipakayajna*, the cooking of special foods at the appropriate occasions; I offer hospitality to the venerable ones. I perform all these dharmas that are followed in the families...

Carrying pots of food in their hands, a hundred thousand women attendants of Yuddhisthira, the wise son of Kunti, used to be engaged in feeding the guests day and night. When Yuddhisthira travelled out of Indraprastha, he was followed by a hundred thousand horses and a hundred thousand elephants. This is how things were when Yuddhisthira, residing in Indraprastha, looked after the world.

I organised for all these great numbers, paid attention to their requirements, and provided for them. I looked after the inmates of the inner household and all the dependants of the king, including even the cowherds and shepherds. I kept myself informed of all that they did or did not do.

O Satyabhama of great auspiciousness and renown, I alone knew of the entire incomes and expenses of the King and the Pandava brothers. O Satyabhama of the auspicious visage, they, the bulls of *bharatavamsa*, left the entire responsibility of the household on me, and engaged themselves in *upasana*, in worship and veneration, and in actions proper to that.

—Mahabharata





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## Community and *Grama* form the Nucleus of the State

The *grihasthas* form into myriad groupings around the locality, the profession, the kinship community, or the religious faith. In the Indian perspective, all these spontaneous and organic formations of the society are taken to be inherently legitimate participants in public affairs. All these partake of the attributes of the State. In fact, the activities of these groups—of the community, the *grama* and the *sampradaya*—in their respective domains, and their mutual interactions, constitute public polity in the Indian sense.

Much of what a modern State is expected to do in the sphere of public polity is in India accomplished through these social groupings. Even today the maintenance of public order and provision of social security, two of the most elaborate and expensive functions of the modern State, are performed largely by the family, the community, the *grama* and the *sampradaya*. That is why India today is one of the least policed countries in the world, and yet the rate of violent crime in India is amongst the lowest. The family, community, the *grama* and the *sampradaya* also continue to take care of the elderly, the sick and the destitute. These functions in modern States consume almost one-third of the gross national product of nations.

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## Community and *Gramas* form the Nucleus of the State

Country (1997)	Violent Crime per 100,000 people
USA	439.2
UK	364.6
Germany	112.8
France	103.5
Russia	67.6
Japan	15.4
Indonesia	5.9
China	5.4
India	4.6

...Continued from previous panel

It is true that with the impoverishment of Indian society during the long period of subjugation, the families, the *gramas*, the communities and the *sampradayas* are bereft of sufficient resources to carry out these functions with the generosity and care that classical India expects of them. Yet, whatever social security is available to Indian people comes from them. And as we shall see later, these organic groupings of the people have also become the major basis of support for the flowering of Indian enterprise in many spheres.



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# King at the Apex Upholds Dharma

The Society in India governs itself through the family, the community, the *grama*, and the *sampradaya*. The duty of the King who sits at the apex of this self-generating and self-governing polity is to guarantee harmonious functioning of these diverse groupings and institutions of the society in their different domains and roles; and to protect the society from external aggression. The King presents the forbidding face of the society to the outsiders. That face assumes an aspect of benign non-intervention when turned inwards.

With respect to the society the King has no legislative or coercive power. His role is to protect the discipline inherent in various organic groups of the society, to protect *desadharmā*, *jatidharma* and *kuladharmā* of various groups. In fact, along with *prajarakshana*, protection of the people, the other major attribute of the King in Indian civilisational perspective is *lokaranjana*, keeping the society in good humour. The Indian term for the king, *rāja*, is derived from this *ranjana* aspect of kingship. The early British observers were indeed surprised to notice that the kings in India took this function so seriously that they often seemed to be in awe of their people.

In addition to performing his duties of protection against external aggression and upholding the customs and discipline of communities, the King in India is expected to behave like a great *grihastha*, who carefully looks after and provides for the welfare of all. In the Mahabharata, Bhishma advises Yuddhisthira to become the provider of the unprovided, and to carefully look after those who happen to be under his direct care. Indian Kings therefore always took care to support institutions of hospitality and sharing throughout their empires. The greatly revered Kings of Indian history like Harshavardhana emptied their treasuries at regular intervals, giving away all their wealth for the care of the needy.



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## The Dharma Rajya of Thanjavur

In a letter of 1801, the Raja of Thanjavur offers the following graphic description of the Chatrams, institutions of hospitality and sharing, of his Rajya.

I will now explain to you the nature and extent of the charities dispensed by them [Chatrams]—

All travellers from the Brahmin to the Pariar inclusive, pilgrims of every description... are fed with boiled rice; those who do not choose to eat the boiled rice receive it unboiled with spices etc. These distributions continue till midnight when a bell is rung and proclamation made requiring all those who have not been fed to appear and take the rice prepared for them.

In each Chatram a teacher to each of the four vedas is appointed, and a schoolmaster, and doctors skilful in the cure of diseases... All the orphans who come to the Chatram are placed under the care of the schoolmaster. They are fed three times a day. Once in four days they are anointed with oil. They receive medicine when they require it, clothes are given to them and the utmost attention paid to them. They are instructed in the sciences to which they may express a preference; and after having obtained a competent knowledge of them the expenses of their marriage are defrayed.

Travellers who fall sick at the Chatram or before their arrival receive medicines and the diet proper for them, and are attended with respect and kindness until their recovery. ...Milk is provided to the infants; pregnant women are entertained with kindness...

The Tanjore country is celebrated over all the world for its charities. It is called Dharma Rajya, and I consider the reputation which reverts upon me through all countries from the appellation, as the most honourable distinction of my rank.

—*Sarforjee Maharaja of Thanjavur, 1801*



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## Rama Rajya

The State constituted according to the principles of Indian polity, where the organic groupings of the people function unhindered, where the order and discipline inherent in these groupings is protected, is *Rama Rajya*. In such a Rajya the forces of nature also remain in their benign aspect, all is well ordered, everyone is healthy, happy and cared for. Mahakavi Valmiki describes the state of affairs under Rama Rajya thus:

There is happiness and cheer all around. All are contented. All are well-nourished. All follow dharma. All are in good health. All are without disease. And, all are free from fear and hunger.

No parent witnesses the death of a child. No wife witnesses the death of her husband. And, all women are chaste and devoted to their husbands.

Fire causes no disasters. No living being ever drowns in water. Winds remain benign. Fevers hold no fear. Nobody has to worry about hunger. Nothing is ever stolen.

The cities and all parts of the country are laden with grain and all kinds of wealth. Everyone is always happy. It is as if *Kritayuga* has returned.

