

Beyond Left and Right: Beyond Left and Right: A New Framework for Decolonizing Indian Political Analysis

Anjali Kanojia, Ph.D.
Faculty, Indology Academy
Email: anjali.kanojia@indologyacademy.org

Abstract

India's political landscape is often examined through the typical Western left–right spectrum, yet this framework often misses the dharmic and civilizational dimensions central to Indian political thought. Based on the Indicist framework and classical Dharmashastra texts, this research note introduces a dharma–adharmic axis as a culturally rooted lens for evaluating parties, political actors, institutions, policies, and governance practices. Dharma involves actions and policies that support governance, social welfare, and the overall well-being of society. At the same time, adharmic behavior works against these principles, reflecting a philosophical perspective that often contrasts with Western approaches. This note identifies two gaps in current literature: the continued reliance on imported Western categories that obscure indigenous political wisdom, and the lack of concrete ways to measure adherence to dharmic principles. To address these gaps, it proposes an Indic research agenda, qualitative and quantitative, offering a tool that is both analytically rigorous and in line with India's historical and civilizational context. By focusing on dharmic principles, this empirical approach provides political scientists and policymakers with a decolonized, ethically grounded perspective for testing and analyzing political behavior and governance in India and possibly beyond.

Keywords: Dharma, Adharma, Indicist, Indian Politics, Dharmashastra, Political Leadership, Governance, Ethics

Introduction

Scholars of Indian politics have long relied on the Western left–right spectrum to classify political parties and governance. While useful for comparative analysis, this binary often flattens the normative and ethical registers central to Indian political discourse (Mehta, 2023; Gauswami, Limbad, & Vidani, 2025). For example, many parties combine market-oriented policies with religiously inspired ideology, making simple left–right classifications misleading. *Indicism* provides a framework to recover indigenous categories of understanding, emphasizing civilizational consciousness and dharmic evaluation (Kanojia, 2023). Within this perspective, the dharma–adharma axis offers a culturally rooted alternative in which political decisions are crafted and evaluated not solely by economic or social left-right ideology, but by their alignment with dharma-based principles of personal responsibility, ethical governance, and societal welfare, all operating within the larger cosmic order, Rta (Kane, 1941).

India adopted the left–right political framework mechanically over the 20th century, influenced by both global ideological trends and its colonial and postcolonial contexts. These concepts are not native to Indian politics but were adapted through anti-colonial movements, socialist thought, and cultural nationalism (Mehta, 2023; Gauswami, Limbad, & Vidani, 2025). These concepts were introduced and adapted during foreign rule and influence. Anti-colonial leaders often engaged with European political thought to frame struggles for India’s independence, selectively incorporating ideas of democratic sovereignty, republicanism, and socialism but leaving out traditional Indian contexts.

Socialist and Marxist influences, including the literature of the times, shaped the development of left-wing ideology in India by emphasizing socialism and misdirected redistribution, which, in turn, influenced the formation of parties like the Communist Party of India and informed policy debates within the Indian National Congress, among others. At the same time, strands of cultural nationalism, rooted in Hindu revivalist thought and the discourse on Hindutva, seemed to provide an anchor for right-leaning ideologies that emphasize religious identity, cultural unity, and the preservation of traditional social structures and practices. Some believe that the convergence of these imported and indigenous ideas resulted in a uniquely Indian political spectrum (Gauswami, Limbad, & Vidani, 2025; Khilnani, 1997; Mehta, 2023). However, the Western ideological left–right spectrum does not capture how parties, political actors, institutions, and bureaucrats in India are educated and how they govern. This blind left-right adoption by India is an ill-fitting template, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Dharma in Indian tradition is simultaneously metaphysical, ethical, and practical. Derived from the Sanskrit root dhru, meaning "to hold" or "support," dharma represents both the law governing the cosmos and the moral and social duties of individuals (Sharma, 2009; Mhaskar, 2011; Kanojia, 2025). The Dharmashastra texts, the Arthashastra, the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana, and the concept of Ramrajya, among others, delineate role-specific duties (Swadharma,

Rajadharma) and broader societal obligations by leaders, emphasizing the welfare of all (bahujana sukhaya bahujana hitayacha) (Kautilya, 1915; Shamasastri, 1915; Singh, 2015; Vital, 2013). In Indicist, swaparikshan emphasizes self-reflection and the use of indigenous perspectives to reclaim marginalized or suppressed knowledge (Kanojia, 2023). By applying this historical, native lens, researchers and practitioners could craft policies and assess not only their practical outcomes but also their alignment with the ethical principles and individual and societal responsibilities central to India's dharmic ethos.

Literature Review

Left-Right Politics and Religious Influence

The left-right spectrum emerged during the French Revolution, in which delegates' seating positions in the legislature symbolized allegiance to either the monarchy and religious authority (right) or popular sovereignty and egalitarian reform (left) (Runciman, 2024; Oxford University Press, 2022). Over time, the framework spread globally, including India, through colonial exposure and engagement with socialist and liberal thought (Gauswami et al., 2025; Mehta, 2023). Therefore, the original seating arrangement has no historical significance or contextual relevance in India.

Right-wing politics often align with religious conservatism, emphasizing hierarchy, moral stability, and cultural preservation (Pew Research Center, 2025; Gallup, 2025). In India, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party are said to show this trend, combining cultural nationalism (Hindutva) with social conservatism (Siyech, 2021). Left-wing politics, influenced by socialist and Marxist ideas, emphasize secularism, redistribution, and social equity, exemplified historically by the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India (Gauswami et al., 2025; Vanaik, 2000), among others.

Religious teachings have shaped both ideological poles: conservatism draws on moral stability and traditional order, while movements inspired by Liberation Theology, for example, foreground social justice and equity (Bradbury & Geraghty, 2025; Global South Studies, 2024). While these labels provide a rough mapping, they fail to capture the dharmic content central to Indian political thought, such as ethical governance, duty toward the populace, and adherence to dharma (Mehta, 2023; Kanojia, 2023). Religion and ideology do not align neatly within India's dharmic context as they do in the West.

Dharma and Ethical Governance

Dharma encompasses duties and ethical conduct, as well as alignment with cosmic law. Classical texts describe multiple forms of dharma, including Swadharma (duty to oneself), Rajadharma (duty of rulers), and Putradharma (duties toward family), reflecting a layered moral universe (Kane, 1930, 1941; Sivananda, 1980). In governance, Rajadharma emphasizes ethical leadership, protection of subjects, and promotion of welfare, connecting political authority to

moral responsibility (Kautilya, 1915; Shamasastri, 1915) to ideal governance and achieving social harmony as in Ramrajya (Mishra, 2025). The Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita illustrate dilemmas of duty and righteousness, highlighting the primacy of fulfilling one's role in alignment with cosmic order (Sivananda, 1980), Rta, and instances of the dissonance that results when that alignment is disrupted in society.

The dharma–adharmic framework assesses political behavior not merely by religious preferences or ideological alignment, but by adherence to ethical and value-based principles. Actions promoting overall welfare, justice, and relational harmony are dharmic, while those undermining collective good, exploiting power asymmetries, or violating ethical norms are adharmic (Sharma, 2009; Vital, 2013). This application encourages naturally engaging with India's cultural heritage, moving beyond colonial interpretations. By utilizing these ideas, grounded in Dharmashastra principles, scholars gain both analytical and ethical clarity, avoiding the limitations of ill-fitting left–right binaries.

Proposed Methodology

This research note employs an empirical approach to examine the applicability of the dharma–adharmic framework, grounded in Indicism, to contemporary Indian political behavior, while also inviting future researchers to further operationalize the dharma–adharmic scale into a quantitative, measurable tool. By integrating historical, textual, and data-driven sources, this approach moves beyond Western left–right categories to assess political actors, policies, and governance through ethical and civilizational principles rooted in Indic thought.

Central to this proposal is a systematic review of key Dharmashastra texts, including the Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and Bhagavad Gita (Kane, 1930, 1941; Kautilya, 1915; Sivananda, 1980). These works provide guidance on accountability, political leadership, ethical governance, societal welfare, and role-specific duties such as Swadharma and Rajadharma. By utilizing these texts, as well as other relevant works within the Indic framework, researchers could identify principles relevant to dharmic leadership and public administration, thereby evaluating political actors, actions, and analyses.

Utilizing and building on this foundation, institutions, Indian political parties and agendas, leaders, and policy decisions could be examined through this Indic lens. Coding criteria could be developed to capture adherence to ethical governance, prioritization of public welfare, institutional integrity, and sound leadership. Actions and policies deviating from these principles would be coded as adharmic. Case studies of specific legislative initiatives and judicial decisions could illustrate the practical application of this framework. At the same time, validation across textual, political discourse (think content analysis), and empirical sources could enhance interpretive rigor grounded in dharma.

Political scientists could further operationalize the dharmic–adharmic scale quantitatively by developing measurable indicators of dharmic and adharmic behavior among political actors, policies, and governance. These indicators might include ethical governance (e.g., transparency, absence of corruption, audit reports), social welfare orientation (e.g., prioritization of public good and equity based on principles of artha), institutional integrity (e.g., bureaucratic accountability and adherence to the rule of law), judicial integrity (ethical decision-making based on not favoring one religious group over another), ecological conscious policy-making (e.g., sustainable resource use in line with reverence toward Mother Nature), and leadership responsibility (e.g., alignment with Swadharma and Rajadharma).

Each indicator could be scored on a Likert scale or similar ordinal measure, and aggregated into an overall dharmic score for an actor, policy, institution, or political party. Researchers could use this score as a dependent variable to examine which factors - such as party ideology, electoral pressure, institutional strength, or leadership characteristics - predict dharmic behavior.

Also, the dharmic–adharmic score could serve as an independent variable to examine the effects of dharmic adherence on outcomes such as public trust, policy effectiveness, implementation, social welfare, judicial outcomes, and environmental sustainability. It could also function as a mediator, for instance, mediating the effect of party ideology on social welfare outcomes or moderating the relationship between policy type and public opinion/satisfaction. Data sources could include official policy documents, legislative records, budget allocations, audit reports, media analyses, and public opinion surveys, past or present. By systematically coding and quantifying dharmic adherence, political scientists could integrate value-based evaluation with empirical precision, resulting in analyses that are culturally grounded, ethically informed, and methodologically robust, all while remaining true to the embedded ethos of Indic civilization.

In this way, the dharma–adharma Indic framework provides a comprehensive, ethically grounded lens for evaluating diverse areas of governance and public policy. For example, media and journalism studies would incorporate principles of ethics and sound judgment, understanding that moral dilemmas should be highlighted without the injection of an adharmic agenda or influence. Such an approach demonstrates how Indicism and the dharma–adharma spectrum can provide both analytical clarity and an ethical lens for understanding political phenomena in India, offering a framework that is at once rigorous as well as attuned to civilizational values.

Applications Across Policy Domains

In practice, political actors and analysts across the spectrum would benefit from engaging with the dharma–adharma framework rather than simply relying on Western left–right categories. Right-leaning parties and leaders, often associated with cultural nationalism and religious affiliation, may assume that their ideological goals automatically align with dharmic principles, yet ethical governance and societal welfare require more than symbolic measures. Similarly,

left-leaning actors, influenced by socialist or secularist traditions, can overlook culturally specific ethical obligations embedded in Indian political thought. By familiarizing themselves with the dharma–adharmic scale, both right- and left-leaning actors and researchers could assess political behavior, craft policies, and make leadership decisions through principles that are vetted, historically grounded, and relevant to India's civilizational values, moving beyond imported categories that may misrepresent or oversimplify political realities.

Policies and administrative actions can be assessed for alignment with dharmic principles, including ethical leadership, transparency, and societal upliftment. For example, budget allocations, bureaucratic accountability, and anti-corruption measures can be coded as dharmic if they prioritize the public good and uphold procedural integrity, or as adharmic if they favor communal interests or undermine history and institutions. Case studies of policy implementation, such as welfare programs or public infrastructure projects, and court decisions could illustrate dharmic-adharmic adherence in practice.

Education can also be evaluated through the principles of the guru-shishya tradition, which emphasizes ethical guidance, proper mentorship, and knowledge for societal well-being. Education is not just for earning a living, but also for producing focused, inspired, and capable human beings, especially in rural areas where the majority of the Indian population lives. Producing capable human beings is the root of producing an informed, conscious citizenry.

Policies that promote access through sound funding, holistic individual development, and character formation would be considered dharmic. In contrast, policies that exacerbate inequality in funding based on religious preferences, provide an incorrect historical context, further deracinate the citizenry, and prioritize narrow economic metrics over holistic, ethical, and intellectual development would be coded as adharmic.

Dharma emphasizes harmony with Prakriti (nature). Policies related to environmental protection, urban planning, and resource management can be assessed based on ecological sustainability, awareness, and conservation ethics. Infrastructure or development projects that compromise environmental integrity for short-term economic gain would be considered adharmic. Examples of movements that could be viewed through the scale include the Chipko movement (Guha, 1989), turning sacred places into tourist hubs, and recent deforestation of protected areas (Elkin et al., 2019; Shinde, 2012; Singh, 2024). These instances discuss how pilgrimage tourism can adversely reshape sacred places, leading to environmental pressures such as pollution, crowding, and changes in biodiversity and landscapes, thereby diluting the concept of pilgrimage. In contrast, those balancing economic growth with ecological consciousness align with dharmic principles.

Relatedly, economic growth could be understood as a conscious action in dharmic governance. Artha is an important Purushartha, and development policies can be crafted and evaluated for their balance between prosperity, social welfare, and sound leadership. Compassionate policies and fair access to resources reflect dharmic practice, whereas exploitation, excessive inequality, favoring certain religious groups while marginalizing others, and crafting policies prioritizing profit over public welfare would be classified as adharmic.

Media and journalism can be assessed for ethical reporting, truthfulness, and public accountability. Coverage that promotes societal welfare, informed debate, and ethical awareness aligns with dharmic principles, while sensationalism, misinformation, or manipulation of public sentiment for partisan agenda-pushing reflects adharmic behavior. This quantification provides a structured approach for media regulators, influencers, journalists, fact-checkers, and researchers studying the societal impact of information dissemination. By consistently applying these coding criteria, political scientists and public administrators can operationalize dharma as a measurable analytical tool, producing evaluations that are simultaneously empirically grounded, ethically informed, and culturally relevant.

Conclusion

This research note proposes a culturally grounded framework for analyzing Indian political behavior that moves beyond the limitations of the Western left–right spectrum. Drawing on Indicism and classical Dharmashastra texts, the dharma–adharmic axis evaluates political actors, policies, and governance decisions according to ethical, societal, and civilizational principles. Unlike conventional ideological classifications, this approach situates political analysis within the Indic tradition, emphasizing personal duties, social welfare, and alignment with dharmic norms.

The existing literature often relies on Western categories that obscure India's ethical and civilizational dimensions, and there are few tools to systematically measure adherence to dharmic principles. This methodology demonstrates how the dharma–adharmic framework can be applied across governance, education, health, environmental consciousness, economic development, and media ethics, providing a consistent evaluation benchmark.

This approach also opens the door for future research to put these ideas into practice and measure them in concrete ways, helping scholars and policymakers assess how closely political actions align with dharmic values in governance. The dharma–adharmic axis offers a culturally grounded and historically aware way of understanding Indian politics. It views decisions and leadership as the responsible use of power to promote social well-being, environmental balance, and conscious decision-making. Centering on dharmic principles, this empirical approach brings both historical and ethical understanding to the study of Indian politics, fostering research and policy-making grounded in Indic civilization and guided by Indic wisdom.

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