Rethinking Rajdharma to Development: Amartya Sen's Influence on Contemporary Political Discourse

* Dr. Anchal Chauhan,
Faculty member,
SCRIET,
Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut

Abstract

This paper offers a reinterpretation of the ancient Indian concept of *Rajdharma*—the ethical obligations of political authority—through the philosophical and developmental framework advanced by Amartya Sen. Historically, Rajdharma linked political power to moral responsibility, envisioning governance as a duty grounded in justice, protection, and welfare. Contemporary democratic politics, however, places greater emphasis on development, rights, and participatory governance. By juxtaposing these two intellectual traditions, this paper examines how Sen's capability approach, his reflections on democracy, and his theory of justice help transform Rajdharma from a monarchical ethic into a modern instrument of democratic accountability. Further, it interrogates the limitations of Sen's framework when applied to the challenges of contemporary governance. The study argues that while Sen's work revitalizes the moral dimensions of governance, its practical application requires confronting deep structural inequalities and institutional distortions in the modern state.

Keywords: Development, Amartya Sen's Influence, Political Discourse, Rajdharma

Introduction

The notion of *Rajdharma* occupies a central position in India's classical political imagination. Rooted in texts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Manusmriti*, and

Arthashastra, it prescribed a morally bound system of governance where rulers bore the

responsibility of ensuring justice, security, and the well-being of their subjects. The king's authority was legitimized not merely through political sovereignty but through adherence to a moral order understood as *dharma*. This ethical framework, while spiritually grounded, was deeply hierarchical, often resting on caste-based and patriarchal assumptions that limited its egalitarian promise.

Modern India, shaped by constitutionalism, democratic participation, and developmental aspirations, reconfigures the ethical foundation of governance. Although monarchy was formally abandoned in 1950, the moral rhetoric of Rajdharma continues to resurface in political debates, especially in moments of crisis when ethical leadership is called into question. Thinkers such as Gandhi interpreted Rajdharma through ideals like *Sarvodaya*, while Ambedkar redirected ethical legitimacy toward constitutional morality.

In this evolving ethical landscape, Amartya Sen's work offers a distinct framework for rethinking governance. Sen's emphasis on public reasoning, plural values, capabilities, and democratic participation provides a modern vocabulary for interpreting the moral responsibilities of the state. This paper situates Rajdharma within this broader intellectual shift, arguing that Sen transforms an ancient moral code into a contemporary discourse on development, justice, and political accountability.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach. It draws primarily on Sen's original works on democracy, justice, and development, along with secondary scholarly literature that elaborates on concepts such as public reasoning, capability, and political ethics. Reports and academic assessments of India's democratic institutions are also used to contextualize the contemporary relevance of Sen's framework. The aim is interpretive rather than empirical: to trace conceptual continuities and ruptures between Rajdharma and modern democratic thought.

Rajdharma in Historical Perspective: Ethics, Duty, and Political Order

Classical Indian political philosophy located the legitimacy of political rule within an overarching ethical order. Rajdharma stipulated the conduct expected of rulers—ensuring justice (*nyaya*), safeguarding the populace, and upholding social welfare. Far from being a

purely administrative doctrine, Rajdharma framed governance as a sacred responsibility tied to cosmic order and divine sanction.

However, these norms were embedded in a stratified social structure. Justice, in many classical texts, was conceived within the boundaries of the *varna* system and patriarchal norms, limiting the universality of Rajdharma. Even as rulers were expected to act selflessly, their subjects did not all enjoy equal moral consideration. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* marks a significant departure by treating governance through a realist lens—emphasizing security, economic stability, and strategic statecraft. Yet, even within its pragmatic orientation, the welfare of the people remained central to the justification of political authority.

Colonial rule disrupted these indigenous frameworks by replacing them with a bureaucratic, positivist model of governance. Nevertheless, the ethical vocabulary of Rajdharma persisted in nationalist discourse. Thinkers like Gandhi reclaimed it, not as divine kingship, but as an ethical vision of non-violent, welfare-oriented governance. This intellectual lineage sets the stage for Sen's modern reinterpretation of political ethics.

Amartya Sen and the Philosophical Shift: From Dharma to Justice

Dharma in classical Indian philosophy functioned as an all-encompassing moral order, prescribing duties based on one's social position and role. Sen departs from this inherited meaning by extracting its normative core—concern for well-being and justice—while freeing it from its hierarchical and doctrinal constraints. Instead of viewing dharma as a fixed or divinely ordained code, Sen treats justice as an open, comparative, and deliberative process.

Sen's emphasis on public reasoning transforms the ethical tradition from a top-down moral prescription to a participatory and dialogic practice. Justice, in his view, is realized not through absolute principles or ideal institutions but through democratic engagement that allows individuals to question norms, contest decisions, and collectively determine priorities. This move shifts the moral centre from cosmic order to civic agency.

By reframing dharma through the lens of human freedom, Sen bridges ancient ethical thought and modern democratic ideals. He positions the individual—not the monarch—as the primary moral agent. The state's legitimacy derives from its capacity to expand freedoms and

protect dignity. In doing so, Sen provides the conceptual tools to reinterpret Rajdharma as a civic ethic rooted in justice rather than divine authority.

Dharma, Public Reason, and the Democratic Ethic

Sen's revival of dharma through public reasoning deepens the democratic implications of governance. Classical dharma demanded conformity; Sen demands dialogue. For him, legitimate governance must be built on processes that allow affected individuals to articulate their concerns, deliberate on values, and critique institutional arrangements.

Public reasoning is not merely procedural. It is also a safeguard against domination, inequality, and epistemic exclusion. By linking public reason to the Capability Approach, Sen shows how democratic dialogue and substantive freedoms reinforce each other. Capabilities define what people can realistically achieve; public reasoning determines which capabilities societies prioritize and how they can be expanded.

This reorientation shifts the focus from formal institutions (*niti*) to lived experiences (*nyaya*). Even well-designed institutions can reproduce injustice if they silence particular voices or overlook structural disadvantage. Sen's approach thus democratizes the ethical project of governance, encouraging continuous revision and accountability. In this sense, the ancient ideal of Rajdharma is recast not as royal duty but as a collective democratic responsibility.

Sen's Influence: Development, Policy, and the Moral Turn in Governance

Sen's work has fundamentally reshaped global and Indian development discourse. Earlier paradigms equated development with economic growth; Sen broadened the metric to include freedom, agency, and human well-being. His collaboration with Mahbub-ul-Haq, leading to the Human Development Index (HDI), institutionalized this expanded vision at the global level.

In India, post-liberalization reforms increasingly reflect Sen's insights. Rights-based legislations such as the MGNREGA, the Right to Education Act, and the National Food Security Act embody the ethical turn in policy-making by framing welfare not as state charity but as enforceable entitlements. Sen's intellectual influence is evident in the shift toward

participatory development, social auditing, and transparency mechanisms that emphasize moral responsibility and democratic accountability.

Sen thereby restores the ethical dimension of governance that Rajdharma once embodied, but grounds it in secular, democratic, and rights-based norms rather than divine or hierarchical authority.

Challenges and Misapplications: The Limits of Sen's Framework

Despite its conceptual richness, the Capability Approach faces significant practical challenges. Its openness, one of its philosophical strengths, creates difficulties when policymakers demand standardized indicators. Capabilities are multidimensional, context-specific, and resistant to uniform measurement. This creates methodological tensions in development planning.

A deeper problem arises from superficial or politically expedient applications of Sen's ideas. Governments and institutions sometimes adopt the vocabulary of capabilities or human development without embracing the participatory ethos that underpins the framework. Development indicators may expand, but structural inequalities remain unaddressed. In such cases, the Capability Approach risks becoming a technocratic instrument rather than a democratic and ethical project.

Sen himself has cautioned against rigid lists or prescriptive interpretations of capabilities, insisting that such priorities must emerge from public dialogue. The challenge, therefore, lies not in the framework but in the political will and institutional design required to sustain genuine participation and ethical governance.

Conclusion

Amartya Sen's intellectual contributions provide a powerful framework for reconnecting governance with ethical responsibility. By shifting the focus from economic growth to substantive freedoms, he redefines the purpose of development as the expansion of human dignity and agency. His work bridges India's ancient moral tradition—especially the concept of Rajdharma—with the demands of contemporary democratic politics.

Sen's reinterpretation transforms Rajdharma from a monarchic ethic into a civic principle, locating political legitimacy in public reasoning, inclusiveness, and justice rather than divine sanction. Yet, the practical application of this framework requires more than conceptual innovation. It demands strong institutions, participatory structures, and sustained attention to inequality.

Ultimately, Sen revitalizes the ethical foundations of governance by showing that democracy is not simply a system of institutions but a continuous moral project. In doing so, he offers a modern, secular, and democratic articulation of Rajdharma—one that places justice, freedom, and human development at the centre of political life.

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