

"A man is  
great by  
deeds, not by  
birth"

-Chanakya

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Working Paper

**IIMK/WPS/435/ECO/2021/04**

**March 2021**

**A Relook into Bhaṭṭikāvya in Search of Indic Governance Model**

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## Abstract

Bhaṭṭikāvya is a Sanskrit-language poem composed during early seventh century CE, by Bhaṭṭi. The poem is famous for various applications to Panini's grammar. The poet has imagined the story of Ramayana in his own insight. The twelfth canto of this composition describes the consultation chamber of emperor Ravana. We analyse this canto to develop an understanding of the governance in Indian civilization as we come across in this text. Contrary of popular perception, the text demonstrates existence of a framework for governance in the Indian civilization. The characters of the text referred to that framework.

**Keywords:** Sanskrit Literature, Governance, Bhaṭṭikāvya

## 1 Introduction

Literature is the mirror of the society. Time and again, one can observe the usefulness of this maxim. In the glorious times of the Indic civilization, when the duty of the government included was to inculcate among the citizens the understanding of "naya" (what must be done in good governance) and "apanaya" (what need to be avoided to ensure good governance), the literature used to reflect a deep understanding of governance. This is supported by what we read in the Mahabharata:

"Citizens who reside in his kingdom know about good policy and bad and do not need to hide their riches. Such a king is supreme among kings."

The Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, chapter 34. Debroy (Volume 8, pp. 292)

In those times, for being a poet too, one needed to rigorously study daṇḍanīti as opposed to the present times when even politicians and diplomats are often found to be grossly bereft of any understanding of daṇḍanīti. In this paper, we make our point through discussion<sup>i</sup> of a prominent work from the Sanskrit literature. We borrowed from Samkhya-Vedanta-Tirth (1949, pp. 134–182).

Bhaṭṭikāvya is a Sanskrit-language poem, called a mahākāvya, possibly composed during early seventh century CE, by Bhaṭṭi. The poem is famous for various applications to Panini's grammar. Its inspiration is the Ramayana. But the poet has imagined the story of Ramayana in his own insight. The twelfth canto of this composition describes the consultation chamber of emperor Ravana who addressed the gathering with due respect: "You all are my

dear friends (mitras), expert counsellors and can imagine the results of an action. Those who do not practise the lessons of science of public policy even after knowing them, they become miserable in encountering a complex problem. However, you have practised the science of public policy. Therefore, you are sharp and adept at constructive proposals to use means like sāma-dāna-bheda-daṇḍa. When a plan is discussed with efficient ministers like you, its implementation is bound to meet success.” Then the emperor described the present situation, “Rama has killed Vālī the valliant and also rākṣasas like Khara and Dūṣaṇa. We have viewed those acts of enmity with indifference and did not consider being pro-active as an option. Hanuman, meanwhile, has burnt down the city of Lanka. In the battle with Hanuman, prince Akṣa died along with many soldiers. The enemy soldiers now rest at the norther shores and preparing to cross the ocean. Tell me what is to be done, under these circumstances?”

The best of the rākṣasas like military general Prahasta and others took up weapons like bow, mace and sword. They made gestures of courage with their arms and hands, holding the weapons and told their king, “O King! The very fact that you have called for a consultation assembly for this puny enemy has itself glorified the enemy by making them significant enough. You have defeated Indra, the king of the heavens. Therefore, some puny humans cannot be of any concern. We can defeat the most intense of the enemies by your order. Rama with this insignificant monkey army cannot be of any concern for us. You have mentioned Hanuman’s burning down of the city of Lanka. That proved no power for the enemy but merely our carelessness. We must have killed him when he was getting ready to burn the city. It is our carelessness that we have not killed him then and there.”

Vibhīṣaṇa, Ravana’s brother, held a different opinion from the rest and he articulated his unpopular point of view in the most congenial manner citing standard wisdom of daṇḍanīti. He refuted that majority opinion, “Your words are expressive of your valour, indeed. However, it is a consultation chamber where wisdom and understanding are required rather than valour. We must express bravery in the battlefield, not here. And, no, it is not us who have augmented the significance of the puny enemy by calling this consultation session on, but it is an ordinary soldier of the enemy side who conferred upon significance on themselves by burning our capital down. Of course, no ordinary soldier of a puny enemy can burn our capital city down. You attribute this act to our follies but the fact is that Hanuman could not be killed by great warrior Indrajit even by means of Brahmāstra, the greatest weapon. Was this too folly of ours or rather their significance? This world as well as their person is too

complex for our understanding which is why we should avoid being complacent. Self-boasting accomplishes nothing. It is also not a sign of winning mentality to ignore the classical science of daṇḍanīti and conducting a rational analysis on the basis of that science.”

## 2 The General Framework

Vibhīṣaṇa first discussed the key concepts of daṇḍanīti. He offered a framework for possible times of war and treaty. The elements of this framework are found in Kautilya’s Artha Shastra or in other texts of daṇḍanīti. He discussed different possible actions of a king and the outcomes. In general, these outcomes can be three-fold: Growth, stalemate and decline. In short, the response of a vijigīṣu (victory-seeking) king depends on outcome of the action—whether it facilitates vijigīṣu’s growth and enemy’s decline, or vijigīṣu’s decline and enemy’s growth and so on. Of course, the effort of the vijigīṣu king should be to facilitate own growth and enemy’s decline. To that goal, the vijigīṣu king must do whatever it takes—war or treaty. At the same time if none of these goals of own growth or enemy’s decline is possible, then the vijigīṣu king must maintain the status quo (“āsana”) without engaging himself in a war or treaty. This is the principal guideline laid down in the framework of Vibhīṣaṇa.

The framework is more complicated with more nuanced thinking. Not all the time, the vijigīṣu king should worry about the enemy’s growth. If the enemy is without any principle or ethics and is driven by sensual pleasure, then his growth will displease all. Even though the enemy grows, but all others are increasingly antagonised by the enemy. As an exception, the vijigīṣu king can ignore the enemy’s growth although the general rule says he should strive to stop his enemy’s growth. In the same vein, own decline must be stopped as a general rule. However, in some exceptional circumstances, own decline can be ignored. It is so when he has eaned decisive victory over his enemies or has strong peace treaties with his enemies. Moreover, the vijigīṣu king must have won Under these circumstances, if the vijigīṣu king has command over his own indriyas, then some decline of his evokes sympathy for him among the limbs of the kingdom such as the ministers, the populace, the army, the allies and so on. However, if some enemies are eyeing over the kingdom and the treaties are not as strong as imagined, this decline could be a severe lapse for the vijigīṣu king who may perish as a consequence.

Of course, the vijigīṣu king should not take treaty as an end in itself but means to the end of own growth and enemy's decline. After the treaty, the goal of the vijigīṣu king would be to kill the enemy king surreptitiously by any means possible—assassination or poisoning. He would entice the best of the people from the enemy territory to migrate out. On account of the treaty, he may not go for an open war but will act as catalyst to make the enemy king fight another powerful king. The moment the enemy king is weakened, he will abrogate the treaty to eliminate the enemy.

If the enemy king is too powerful, the vijigīṣu king would like to sign a treaty with the enemy. If the enemy king is not interested in a treaty, then the vijigīṣu king will use *bheda* appealing to the dynamics of international politics to force the enemy king to sign a peace accord. With extremely heartening gestures, the vijigīṣu king will endear the enemy king and then sow division (*bheda*) among the enemy kingdom's ministers. The enemy king will decline from these machinations, which is the goal of the vijigīṣu king.

A king who cannot go into a conflict, will end up being ruined. The capacity to get into conflict marks admirable qualities of the king. For a king to wage a war, his ministers and military generals must be quite patient to not abandon the side on the face of an adversity. It also must be the case that the enemy is incapable of forging any kind of division among the top executives by creating fear. The executives must not hanker for pleasure. Along with enjoying full confidence and loyalty of his executives, the vijigīṣu king must have hard infrastructure, such as strong fort in jungles, mountainous region or in river-deltas. Even after having all these virtues, the vijigīṣu king cannot fight an enemy king who has similar virtues. Since both of them are comparable, maintaining the status quo is the solution. The policy of action to be pursued under these circumstances is called “dog-boar-quarrel” (*śvāvarāha kalaha*). When a hunter is incapable of killing a boar, he sets his hunting dog to fight the boar. He does not care about the outcome of this fight between the dog and the boar. Whoever wins, it is good for him as he can eat either the killed dog or the killed boar. This thinking of the hunter is called dog-boar-quarrel”. Similarly under these circumstances when a virtuous vijigīṣu king is matched by an equally virtuous enemy, the king must use machinations to set the enemies of his enemy go against his enemy. In the meanwhile, the vijigīṣu king must pursue policies towards his own growth.

Any vijigīṣu king's power is measured by three aspects: (i) mantra-śakti (soft-power), (ii) prabhu-śakti (hard power), and (iii) utsāha-śakti (morale and energy). If the vijigīṣu king's power and effort to implement own growth results in submission of the enemy, then war against the enemy is inadvisable. Therefore, ensuring own growth is the implicit way of conquering the enemies. Furthermore, if a vijigīṣu king fighting an enemy can neither protect his own assets nor conquer the enemy's assets, he must take refuge of a different powerful king so as move from the state of decline to stalemate or from stalemate to growth. This king, to whom the vijigīṣu king takes shelter, should also be considered an enemy by the vijigīṣu king, although he may not be directly attacking the vijigīṣu king. When the vijigīṣu king is simulataenously attacked by many enemies, he must pursue differential policies towards the enemies—to some to make accords, to some to initiate warfare—depending on which policy can lead to his own growth.

### **3 Why Ravana is weaker than Rama?**

After elaborating the framework of the foreign policy in totality, now Vibhīṣaṇa of the Bhaṭṭikāvya concentrated on analyzing the present problem in this general framework. He effectively demonstrated that all the qualities that are necessary in the character of a vijigīṣu king for pursuing a policy of warfare, were missing in Ravana's character. He said in the consultation assembly, that because of his oppressive policies, Ravana was denounced by the citizens. The other kings in the rājamaṇḍala (the relevant kings in Lanka's geopolitical position)—including Indra, the king of the heaven—were also angry with Ravana. On the other hand, Rama—the enemy of Ravana—enjoyed the loyalty of his people as well as the respect of the other kings. Therefore, from this point of view, Rama was powerful while Ravana was powerless. Was Rama no match for Ravana's valour? Only a deluded person would think so. Already Vālī, the great friend of Ravana, was killed by Rama along with coronation of Sugrīva, a great enemy of the rākṣasas. What Vibhīṣaṇa stopped short of saying was that Ravana could not undo this damage by means of his valour.

Vibhīṣaṇa continued his argument to demonstrate why Rama stood dominant over Ravana. Yes, indeed Ravana had been a world-conqueror in some past time. However, Rama had systematically reduced the sphere of influence of the king of the rākṣasas. He had killed Tāḍakā, and then defeated Suvāhu and Mārīca away, then killed Khara-Dūṣaṇa and so on. Now, virtually Ravana's influence was limited to the walled city of Lanka, no more. As a

matter of fact, even in this city, Ravana's sovereignty had been challenged by different acts of Hanuman such as burning of the city, killing of Akṣa the prince and destruction of the Aśoka garden. Moreover, the principles of politics dictate that for a successful tenure, the king must win over the inner six enemies<sup>ii</sup> of kāma (desire), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), māna (excessive sense of pride), mada (vanity) and harṣa (excessive delight). He must have a functioning system of spies and intelligence. The king must work to establish dharma and use proper distribution of artha to become popular. However, Ravana was subservient to the inner six enemies instead of conquering them. His ministers were no good in the science of politics. Possibly Vibhīṣaṇa meant that in the absence of intelligent discussion of the question, Ravana's ministers raised their weapons in the consultation room, which itself showed the poverty of wisdom in Ravana's cabinet. On the other hand, Rama conquered these six inner enemies and his ministers are proficient in the science of politics. Like a man fighting an elephant, Ravana needed to fight the war on an unequal footing.

Vibhīṣaṇa imagined the possible scenarios of peace and war, both, and their implications to all possible parties. "Now that we are feeble and Rama is strong, is it possible that we can come together through an accord?" The youngest brother of Ravana dwelt on the possibilities on the accord. He cited a maxim from daṇḍanīti, "uttaptaṃ uttaptena saṃvadyate" (A hot object gets attached to another hot object). The underlying understanding is that even though ordinarily two pieces of iron cannot be merged together, when both of them are white-hot, they can be attached together. Similarly, two parties who cannot come together in an ordinary situation, could easily come together when both are in an aggrieved or agitated ("hot") state. Vibhīṣaṇa built on the case for accord, "Rama is aggrieved by the loss of Sita whereas we are agitated at the loss of Khara, Dūṣaṇa, prince Akṣa and others. Therefore, we both can come together. Returning Sita to her husband would be the cementing element of our tie. Aggrieved by the loss of Sita, Rama is determined to strike us with his great valour. But he will have no cause to go into war once we return Sita back. The means of sāma itself will douse the fire of revenge in him.

"Now, what if my arguments were wrong? Suppose that instead of Rama being dominant over us, both the parties are comparable. Still then, it is not advisable to go to war in case of simply matching the enemy's strength. Like two equal sized earthen pots clash to end up both being destroyed, two equally matched kings would end up being destroyed on being matched.

Could we fight the war based on our allies? But, we stand alone with very many enemies whereas Rama has devoted friends, Indra-led devatas etc. in his stride.

“War is the right policy for action towards a feeble enemy only. The strength of a king is counted by the parameters of mantra-śakti, prabhu-śakti, and utsāha-śakti. Deficiency in one or two powers out of three is considered feebleness for a king. We cannot say that mantra-śakti (knowledge) wise we are stronger. What about utsāha-śakti? We have tasted the valour of Rama and his associates like Hanuman and Sugrīva. We cannot claim superiority there too. Prabhu-śakti is the only parameter in which we can claim our superiority. We have a massive treasury and a huge army with cavalry, elephant-riders, and chariots. Now, even though we have our superiority, but our stakes are too huge. If we win after much loss, it would be a pyrrhic victory as we would gain exactly nothing from the enemy. They are bereft of any prosperous kingdom or well-endowed treasury that need to be defended against any invading force. On the other hand, we will lose a lot of our wealth and manpower both in case of victory or loss. A cost-benefit analysis indicates the unprofitable nature of war.

“Moreover, a non-accomplished king who has never enjoyed prosperity but lives in poverty, can take a risk of going into a war whose outcome is very uncertain. It behooves him but not an accomplished king like our king whose wealth and accomplishments are in their prime. Is this war a kind of dry enemy for us? Let’s examine this idea. A dry enemy is the one in which we gain nothing in victory but we lose everything at loss. Of course, any kind of war means loss of resources. Only if the outcome of the war can lead to growth somewhere, we can go for the war. In this war, we gain or lose nothing from the other kings, however, a long war—which looks likely given Rama’s energy—makes the various limbs of the state (ministers, country etc.) tired and bitter with the king if they are not already happy with him. In all possibility, this leads to our decline.

“We can observe Rama’s master-stroke in killing Vālī—we lost a great friend and earned a great enemy in form of Sugrīva. Now, can we use bheda to break the alliance between Sugrīva and Rama? Bheda can be applied to four types of persons—the angry, the greedy, the afraid, and the humiliated. Does Sugrīva belong to any of these four categories? He has received the crown by Rama’s grace. He is no way angry with Rama. He is not into the alliance to seek any material benefit. Therefore, he is not greedy. Rama is allied to Sugrīva by a strong treaty. He has no fear from Rama by any stretch of imagination. As he has benefited



from Rama, he is definitely not humiliated. The only reason for Sugrīva's effort is to do good to a benefactor, which is a noble sentiment. In sum, bheda is not applicable towards Sugrīva.

“Is there any possibility to approach other monkey clan leaders like Nala, Kumud and separate them from their king and Rama? They are monkeys and care not for good tasty food. Fruits are their sole food. They live in jungle not in palaces. They neither hanker for jewel-like women nor value wealth and fortune. What about Aṅgada, the son of Vālī? It is true that his father was a great friend of Ravana however his mother Tārā is fond of Sugrīva. Moreover, not only Sugrīva has coronated Aṅgada as the crown prince, he is also affectionate to Tārā's son like his own. It can be safely concluded that Aṅgada would not desert the king of the monkeys for Ravana.

“Can we seek the support of a more powerful king? We have none at sight who is available for us to be approached. If we feel that we will remain within this strong city without problem, that idea is not realistic enough. We have no friends who can attack the rear of the enemy army to curb the siege off the city. On the other hand, our enemy's demands are very limited. The monkey army fights using trees and stones. They need no grain as they eat only fruits. They need no meat or ghee. Since they do not ride horses or elephants, the concern for feed for the animals is also absent. They live very simple life drinking ordinary water without any desire for wines and beverages. Their kingdom too is not a prosperous one and so they don't need forces to defend it. Overall, they can seize our city for ages without much problem whereas we will perish.

“I see no way we can exercise the option of war without loss. Therefore, we must immediately seek treaty. If our king goes for war, it is us who are going to lose,” Vibhīṣaṇa concluded.

In the Bhaṭṭikāvya, many aspects of the Ramayana were made much abridged but not the part on daṇḍanīti. This is indicative of deep respect of the Indic civilization towards this discipline. For the ancient Indians the collective life and its understanding used to be given by daṇḍanīti. Bhaṭṭi finds a very objective and rational Vibhīṣaṇa, the best of the counsellors, who did his duty without any emotional bias. He speaks only on the basis of facts and framework without getting personal into the matter-at-hand. This Vibhīṣaṇa is very different than the portrayal of Vibhīṣaṇa by Tulsidas, the composer of the *Ramcharitmanas*, the Hindi

Ramayana in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Tulasidas's Vibhīṣaṇa is a devotee of Rama. He considers Rama not as a mere mortal but as īśvara ("God") in this universe (The Ramcharitmanas, 5:39).. He wants his brother to surrender to Rama as one must bow down to God. Bhaṭṭi's Vibhīṣaṇa is a great professional. He is dedicated to his duty. He is loyal to the state not the king in person. He has a lot of respect for Rama the strategist and Rama the warrior, but Rama, to him, is no different than an ordinary man. From his reading of the geo-political strategy, he analyses the situation well and observes a treaty is the only realistic policy option. This change of portrayal of Vibhīṣaṇa's worldview is an effect of change in the Indians' attitude to daṇḍanīti that took place in the meanwhile.

#### **4 Kumbhakarṇa and the five-limbed Consultation Process**

In the same consultation assembly, Kumbhakarṇa, the other brother of the king, spoke on the topic. He concurred with his brother Vibhīṣaṇa that a peace accord is the need of the hour. However, he doubted that the king would ever listen to him. The reason lies in excessive sense of pride of Ravana whose own ego will defeat the voice of reason and rationality to secure own people's welfare. He lamented that the rakṣasas are indebted to Ravana for their unprecedented prosperity and therefore, out of a sense of gratitude as well as belongingness, they need to pay back by their lives to implement Ravana's decisions.

Now, to illustrate his point, Kumbhakarṇa talked about the five aspects of the consultation process. Interestingly they were duly elaborated by Kautilya in the Arthashastra, book 1, chapter. Understandably, Bhaṭṭi were quite versed in daṇḍanīti. These five aspects are: (i) Means to initiate the project, (ii) human resources and material resources, (iii) the change in plan depending on date and place, (iv) Alternative plans in case of failure (plan B), and (v) The outcome of the project. For the warfare, the initiation happens through strengthening of the forts and sending of envoys in the the enemy territory. The second aspect is comparing own human resources and infrastructure and material resources to those of the enemy. The third is discussion of different nuanced measures in different types of topography and geography, in different seasons, in different times of the day etc. In the fourth aspect, one need to enlist what could go wrong and what would be the solution for that. In the final step, the outcome of the project may be deliberated upon and assessed whether the project may cause growth from stalemate and stalemate from decline for it to be taken up. Kumbhakarṇa

actually said that the king of the rākṣasas is insensitive to the third aspect of the consultation and he did not care to change his plans based on location and time. This haughtiness originated at his ego and would cause ruin.

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