

# The Dharmashashtra: Understanding Modern-Day Conflictual Behaviour Through The Lenses Of Ancient Hindu Texts

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## **Abstract**

*This study aims to explore the nature of conflict and violence in our reality through the lenses of Dharmashashtra. Our study is not aimed at providing a solution to conflicts, instead, we have conceptualized factors that are responsible for disturbing the delicate cosmic balance. This piece explores the impact of compartmentalization of ancient Indian philosophies within a specific time and content. However, this could have catastrophic consequences as the interpretation of various thoughts or ideas in the Vedas have continuity across time. The Varna system is overly emphasized as an Indian curse that has no solution; however, this became a negative aspect only when the British defined it clearly in an objective manner. This also led to an eternally conflict-oriented societal formation in India. Our goal is to break away from the objective and clear interpretation of Dharmashashtra, keeping the discussions ongoing throughout our entire existence is key to realizing a society that is at a balance.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, Dharmashashtra, Indian, Philosophy, Vedic

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world faces a humanitarian crisis with the immense surge in violent conflicts and wars in the twenty-first century. Humanity faces multiple exigencies due to an upsurge in conflicts (Schutte, et al., 2021). Society at large is on the verge of a breakdown; immorality has become a major philosophical issue. However, as we know that there are significant difficulties in separating righteousness from immorality, and good from bad, it is difficult to term conflicts as a negative phenomenon. Immorality is always a paradox; hence a clear distinction is not possible (Ellemers, et al., 2019). We do not seek to justify acts of violence through our study, instead, our goal is to understand modern-day conflictual behavior through the lenses of ancient Hindu texts, especially the Dharmashashtra. The Dharmashashtra can be understood as a treatise consisting of ethics one should follow in life (Britannica, n.d.). This could also be observed as a collection of guiding principles on a cosmic scale. Yajnavalkya, the ancient Vedic sage had prescribed specific duties for every varna which is at times associated with caste. Caste could be understood as social stratification characterized by hierarchy (Jha, 1997). The Varna system is often connected with the hierarchical division of caste, mostly in Indian society, deriving significantly negative connotations. However, the philosophy of the varna system is much more difficult to comprehend, and it should not be observed in a vacuum. Most importantly, the Dharmashashtra was vital for acting as a balance in ancient Indian society. Hence, we need to reimagine the application of Dharmashashtra in modern society, especially to retrieve the cosmic balance. The core aspects of Dharmashashtra remain significant in ensuring that conflicts are dealt with in a 'just' manner. Our study assumes that human societies are bound to fall into a cycle of violence and conflicts (Loggins, 2022). However, it is the balance of cosmic order that remains vital.

## **CONFLICTS ARE ETERNAL**

How do we view conflicts in society? It is a difficult question; however, conflicts are generally associated with significantly negative aspects (United Nations, n.d.). We keep coming across the idea of conflict resolution, which assumes that there is every possibility of resolving them (Leatherman & Vayrynen, 1995). However, is there ever a true resolution to a conflict? We argue that conflicts are not meant to be completely resolved, attempting to do so would be a futile effort. Also, it is important to mention that conflicts generally carry a negative connotation as it is associated with a similar word 'violence,' which is believed to be the result of conflicts not remaining in a desired space (VCU News, 2017). Instead, we argue that a clear separation between conflict and violence is not possible. The realm of conflicts demands the existence of some form of violence. However, a problem emerged since human society tilts more towards the vicious cycle of harm, putting the delicate balance of the cosmic order at risk. Therefore, there is a need to revisit Dharmashashtra to ensure that the balance is maintained. To separate conflict from society would be impossible even for the most pure-hearted souls amongst us. However, it is rather possible to imagine a society where conflicts remain, but in a balanced manner, not posing a serious risk to the cosmic order. Here, Dharmashashtra can become a major source to restore balance. The first part of our literature review deals with conceptualizing conflicts in society, mainly drawing from

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Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence (Dilts, et al., 2012). We have also drawn from the ideas of Peter Wallenstein in comprehending conflicts in society (Pettersson & Wallenstein, 2015). The second part of our literature review conceptualizes core elements within Dharmashashtra that could help us better understand conflicts and maintain an aggregate balance.

## **DHARMASHASTRA**

The Dharmashashtra contains more than 5,000 titles, it can be classified into three types; Sutras, Smritis, and Nibandhas. These were written with the purpose of providing meaning to the various obscured stanzas in the Vedas. At times, the traditional science of interpretation was utilized in finding a common plane for diverging philosophical traditions (Britannica, n.d.). The Vedas are ancient Hindu texts where one can find evidence of elements related to governance (Mukherjee, 2010). Emphasis was given to incorporating people into the governance structure, as their role was inseparable in the working of the administration. There are significant elements in Dharmashashtra that refer to the qualities of a king, moreover, emphasis has also been given to statecraft (Sharma & Singh, 2010). It is important to note that Dharmashashtra is not set in a specific point of time; which means it has a continuity throughout the realm of reality. With the development of society, Dharmashashtra will also evolve, the only need is for a continuous interpretation according to the dynamic nature of reality. Kautilya drew inspiration from Dharmashashtra to develop his ideas related to statecraft. Here, we can see that although Kautilya suggested various means of covert and overt actions, structural integrity is always emphasized (Kaur, 2010). The Dharmashashtra contains elements that prevent negative virtues like fraudulent behavior. However, the most important aspect that could be drawn from this ancient Vedic literature is the concept of a 'social order' and Human Rights (Kumar & Choudhury, 2021). This model society would not necessarily be conflict-free if we draw ideas from Galtung's theory of structural violence, in fact, violence would be embedded in this structure as well. Now why are we saying this? Basically, maintaining the structure itself requires some form of violence, tangible or otherwise. The Dharmashashtra is the source of modern Indian law (Donald R. Davis, 2022). However, it is overtly compartmentalized during interpretation and thus, it does not retain the dynamic nature of Vedas.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For our study, we have conducted an extensive literature review, and we have attempted to conceptualize conflict as a reality that cannot be subsided. We have taken 20 events of conflict from India and coded them in terms of elements of structural or direct violence. Ours is a qualitative and descriptive study (Tomaszewski, et al., 2020). This piece is mostly a review paper as we have not taken the data for direct interpretation and analysis, instead, this is a deliberate attempt to retain the philosophical elements in our study. We have taken Dharmashashtra as a lens for observing the events of conflicts and we have attempted to philosophize this realm of reality. The goal of our study is to ensure that the balance does not shift more towards negative virtues such as violence or harm, however, these are components of our reality and would thus remain inseparable from our existence. We have faced significant challenges as the Dharmashashtra contains elements that are not restricted to a singular point in time. We took the decision of observing the Dharmashashtra as a timeless interpretation of the Vedas. Therefore, our study involves a re-imagination of Dharmashashtra according to the dynamic nature of modern-day society. We have utilized the theoretical framework of structural violence, which is a broader perspective on harm and is more suited to be used as an integrative lens with the Dharmashashtra.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

The Dharmashastras provide an interpretation of laws and duties prescribed in the Vedas, albeit in a more comprehensible manner. However, it is important to note that the source of interpretation remains the Vedas, and hence the philosophical elements within Dharmashashtra are eternal and timeless. The Britishers played a significant role in compartmentalizing ancient Hindu philosophies (Pattanaik, 2022). However, this became a major problem and it disturbed the delicate balance of the society as the ancient Hindu philosophies were never meant for a singular and fixed interpretation. We are not suggesting that the ancient Hindu texts conceptualize only a peaceful society. Instead, we argue that Dharmashashtra could be a source for restoring the delicate balance in the society, this is the exact reason for which the Vedas were written. Maintaining the cosmic balance along with its all-integrative elements is a herculean task. To deal with conflicts and violence embedded in the structure of our society it is important to understand that a narrow objective approach will not work. The Britishers managed to give an objective interpretation to the Dharmashashtra, which resulted in the disturbance of cosmic balance.

There remains a possibility of disintegrating the modern-day Indian law from Dharmashashtra, a deconstruction is of utmost importance given the fact that we are facing a significant number of conflicts that at times turn violent, threatening the societal fabric. Although violence is inseparable from our reality, it should not occupy a larger space than it should. This space has been already determined successfully by ancient Hindu texts. However, with the colonial interpretation of Dharmashastras, this space has substantially increased in dimension. Moreover, the varna system should not be disregarded, neither it should be overly emphasized like the strategy adopted by the British. The Varna system could play a vital role and its interpretation is dynamic like its philosophical content. For instance, the Varna system existed for the

sole purpose of maintaining a balance in society, therefore, the objective is always positive in nature. We reiterate that in spite of containing significant features that are essential for maintaining balance in societies, the Dharmashashtra would not be able to separate any integrative elements from our reality which can also include violence. However, it remains significant in retaining the cosmic balance.

## CONCLUSION

From our study, we can conclude that there are significant philosophical aspects in Dharmashashtra that need to be relooked according to the changing nature of our reality. We need to decompartmentalize the laws and ethics contained in the Dharmashashtra and adopt a dynamic interpretation approach that could help us to restore the delicate balance of society. Conflict and violence are inseparable elements of the nature of our reality and it would be futile to attempt disassociation of these parts. However, the problem arises when any of these elements occupy a larger space than they ideally should, hampering our timeline as a whole. The Britishers compartmentalized many of the ideals contained in Dharmashashtra setting conditions for a society tilting more towards the element of violence, disturbing our existence and cosmic reality.

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