



Rājadharma and the Ideals of Kingship in Śrīharṣa's Naiṣadhīyacaritam

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Abstract – The Naiṣadhīyacaritam of Śrīharṣa stands as a pinnacle of Sanskrit mahākāvya tradition, offering profound insights into the concept of kingship (rājadharma). This research article explores the role of the king, his responsibilities, and governance principles as depicted in this text. Through an in-depth examination of its verses, this study highlights how Śrīharṣa integrates the ideals of dharmaśāstra and arthaśāstra, aligning the portrayal of King Nala with the models of ideal rulers described in texts like Manusmṛti, Yājñavalkya Smṛti, and Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra. By analyzing the poet's emphasis on the king's fourteen types of knowledge and his duty to uphold justice, the article sheds light on the interplay between moral philosophy and political realism in classical Sanskrit literature.

Keywords: Rājadharma, Naiṣadhīyacaritam, Śrīharṣa, Kingship, Sanskrit Literature, Political Philosophy, Dharmaśāstra, Arthaśāstra.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of kingship (rājadharma) in ancient India is deeply rooted in the ethical, political, and religious philosophies of the time. It has been extensively discussed in various sources, including the Vedas, epics, Dharmaśāstras, and Arthaśāstra traditions. Among these, Śrīharṣa's Naiṣadhīyacaritam provides a unique literary exposition of the ideal ruler, using the legendary tale of King Nala and Queen Damayantī. Composed in the 12th century CE, this mahākāvya not only serves as a poetic masterpiece but also as a treatise reflecting contemporary political thought and governance models.

This research aims to analyze the representation of kingship in Naiṣadhīyacaritam, focusing on the qualities, duties, and ethical dilemmas of the ruler as depicted in the text. The study will contextualize Śrīharṣa's perspective within the broader tradition of Indian political thought and examine how his portrayal of Nala aligns with or diverges from established norms of rājadharma.

1.1 Theories of the Origin of Kingship

Monarchy was the dominant form of governance in ancient India, as reflected in early and later Vedic texts, epics, and the Purāṇas. Various ancient Indian political thinkers proposed different theories to explain the emergence of kingship and the state. Since no distinct theory exists concerning the state's origin, the theories of kingship are often regarded as indicative of state formation. Kauṭilya explicitly stated that the king embodies the state,¹ reinforcing the notion that the rise of the state coincided with the establishment of kingship.

The earliest references to kingship's origin appear in Brāhmaṇa literature. The Aitareyabrāhmaṇa describes how, during the mahābhīṣeka ceremony, the gods, led by Prajāpati, selected Indra as their sovereign ruler due to his exceptional strength, valor, and excellence.² This implies an elective element in Indra's ascension to power. Additionally, the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa mentions that Prajāpati created Indra and entrusted him



with the celestial realm to govern,³ supporting the divine origin theory of kingship. Similarly, the Śāntiparva of the Mahābhārata upholds this belief by narrating how Pṛthu was anointed by the gods and sages to protect the people, a concept that P.V. Kane associates with the divine kingship theory.⁴

The Śāntiparva also presents an alternative perspective on kingship's origin. It recounts that in the absence of a ruler, people turned to Brahmā for guidance, leading to Manu's appointment as king. Initially reluctant, Manu agreed to rule after the people pledged to give him a portion of their produce in return for governance and protection.⁵ P.V. Kane interprets this as supporting the divine origin theory, while Bhandarkar views it as an example of the Social Contract Theory, where the people, distressed by anarchy, voluntarily elected Manu as their ruler in exchange for security.⁶ Kauṭilya also has referred Manu, illustrating how, in a state of anarchy, where the strong oppressed the weak comparable to large fish swallowing smaller ones people collectively decided to offer a share of their produce to a ruler in exchange for protection.⁷ This exemplifies the concept of mātsyanyāya, emphasizing the necessity of kingship in preventing social disorder.

Ancient Indian political thought describes an initial golden age of harmony, which eventually declined into mātsyanyāya, a condition of lawlessness where the powerful subjugated the weak. The Śāntiparva of the Mahābhārata asserts that anarchy leads to continuous plundering, preventing individuals from enjoying their wealth. Consequently, the presence of a king was deemed essential to maintain order and shield the weak from oppression.⁸ Similarly, the Rāmāyaṇa states that in a realm without a king, property ownership becomes meaningless, as people exploit one another like fish in a water body.⁹ The Manusmṛti echoes this sentiment, asserting that without a ruler, society descends into chaos, allowing the strong to dominate the weak.¹⁰

These discussions highlight that kingship arose out of social necessity. Initially, people lived under natural law, but growing inequalities separating the strong from the weak and the rich from the poor disrupted social equilibrium. To restore order, a ruler was appointed to unify governance. The Ṛgveda also warns against societal collapse in the absence of a king.¹¹

Another theory attributes the rise of kingship to military necessity. The Aitareyabrāhmaṇa records an instance where, after suffering defeat at the hands of demons, the gods sought Soma's leadership, recognizing that their failure resulted from the absence of a commander.¹² This indicates that military needs played a crucial role in establishing kingship.¹³

Thus, the various theories divine origin, social contract, and military necessity collectively explain how kingship emerged as an essential institution for governance, stability, and security in ancient Indian society.

2. RĀJADHARMA IN NAIṢADHĪYACARITAM

Sanskrit mahākāvya form a vast literary tradition, and due to their dependence on different personalities, they exhibit variations according to time and place. This very diversity reflects the Indian cultural ethos. The Naiṣadhīyacarita mahākāvya, composed by Śrīharṣa in twenty-two cantos (sarga), is also a carrier of this literary tradition. It is regarded as one of the Bṛhatṭrayī (the grand trio) of Sanskrit mahākāvya, alongside Kirātārjunīyam and Śiśupālavadhā. Among these, Naiṣadhīyacaritam stands out for its imaginative brilliance, aesthetic appeal, literary charm, and adherence to classical standards. Hence, the Sanskrit scholars have famously proclaimed:

“uditē naiṣadhē kāvyē kva māghaḥ kva ca bhāravīḥ”

(With the rise of the Naiṣadhā poem, where now stand Māgha and Bhāravī?) Furthermore, it is also said:



“naiṣadham vidvadauṣadham”

(“Naiṣadha is the medicine for scholars.”)

The primary source of the Naiṣadhīyacaritam is the Nalopākhyānam as described in the Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata. Through his ever-innovative poetic and literary genius, Śrīharṣa has expounded numerous branches of knowledge in a graceful and refined style. His poetic brilliance illuminates various traditional disciplines, and he successfully incorporates them into his narrative. The mahākāvya contains references to philosophy, music, Āyurveda, science, astrology, grammar, sociology, erotics (kāmaśāstra), jurisprudence (dharmaśāstra), gemology (ratnaśāstra), omenology (śakunaśāstra), physiognomy (sāmudrikaśāstra), culinary science (pākaśāstra), equine science (aśvaśāstra), mantra science (mantraśāstra), alchemy (rasāyanaśāstra), weaponry (āyudhaśāstra), zoology (prāṇīśāstra), and political science (rājānītiśāstra), among others. These topics are not presented merely for artistic embellishment but also to highlight their significance.

Since Naiṣadhīyacaritam is connected to the Mahābhārata, it naturally engages with the concept of rājadharmā (the duty of a king), as the Mahābhārata itself fundamentally revolves around this principle. Rājadharmā encompasses all aspects of governance, with the welfare of the people at its core. Whether it is a monarchy or a democracy, the essence of good governance lies in the well-being of the people. The discipline of governance, free from bias and injustice, is what defines rājadharmā. It always operates on the principles of justice, leaving no space for discrimination between one's own and others. The prosperity and security (yoga-kṣema) of the subjects are the foundation of all political systems. No system of governance can establish a just order based on divisions among people. Here, 'divisions' refer not to casteism, regionalism, or sectarianism but to policies aimed at collective welfare. Any form of societal discrimination is detrimental to a nation.

Śrīharṣa envisions a king wholly dedicated to the welfare of the entire world. At the very beginning of the mahākāvya, he describes King Nala in the following verse:

nipīya yasya kṣītirakṣiṇaḥ kathām tathādriyante na budhāssudhāmapi /
nalassitacchatritakīrtimaṇḍalassa rāśirāśīmahasām mahojvalaḥ //¹⁴

2.1 Protector of Earth

Upon hearing the tale of that protector of the earth, the wise revere it even more than nectar itself. Such was King Nala, radiant like a mass of light, adorned with a halo of spotless fame like a white parasol.

Here, four key attributes of King Nala are highlighted his role as a protector of the earth, his unblemished reputation, his splendor emanating from festivals, and his brilliance. When discussing the seven limbs (saptāṅga) of the state king, minister, territory, army, treasury, law enforcement, and allies the king is always considered first. Likewise, Śrīharṣa initially describes the virtues of King Nala.

A king's duty to protect the earth signifies his impartial governance over all subjects. He must be adorned with untainted glory, and his grandeur should be reflected in the joyous state of his people. A contented populace, after all, brings vibrancy to festivals and celebrations. The term tejorāśī (mass of radiance) signifies that a king must display unyielding brilliance in meting out justice to wrongdoers. As Manusmṛti states:

tasyārthī sarvabhūtānām goptāram dharmamātmajam /
brahmatejomayam daṇḍamasṛjātṭpūrvamīśvaraḥ //¹⁵



For the fulfillment of the king's duties, the Lord first created the king's scepter (daṇḍa), the protector of all beings, the very embodiment of Dharma, and endowed with the brilliance of Brahman.

Similarly, Yājñavalkya Smṛti describes the king as one who is enthusiastic, generous, grateful, respectful to elders, humble, truthful, noble, pure, prompt in executing rightful actions, well-versed in the scriptures, free from meanness, gentle-natured, aware of his own shortcomings, introspective, proficient in spiritual knowledge, politically astute, and well-versed in the three Vedas.¹⁶

2.2 Nala as an Ideal King in Naiṣadhīyacaritam

The poet describes King Nala as possessing fourteen types of knowledge, essential for an ideal ruler. These include: Vedic wisdom (Vedaśāstra), Ethics and jurisprudence (Dharmaśāstra), Military strategy (Dhanurveda), Governance and administration (Rājanīti), Economic policies (Arthaśāstra), Astrology and omens (Jyotiṣaśāstra), Medicine (Āyurveda), Poetry and aesthetics (Sāhitya), Diplomacy (Mitra-bheda), Fine arts (Kāvyaśāstra), Horse science (Aśvaśāstra), Elephant training (Gajaśāstra), Music and performing arts (Sangīta), Craftsmanship (Silpaśāstra).

These attributes reflect a holistic view of kingship, where the ruler is not merely a warrior but a learned and cultured leader, ensuring the prosperity of his people.

adhītibodhācaraṇapracāraṇairdaśāscatasraḥ praṇayannupādhibhiḥ /
caturdaśatvaṁ kṛtavān kutassvayaṁ na vedmi vidyāsu caturdaśasvayaṁ //¹⁷

This verse implies that King Nala was not only a master of the four Vedas, six Vedāṅgas, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, Dharmaśāstra, and Purāṇas amounting to fourteen branches of learning but also engaged in their study, practice, and dissemination.

In Arthaśāstra, however, a more concise categorization of knowledge is found:

“ānvikṣikī trayī vārtā daṇḍanītiśceti vidyāḥ”¹⁸

Philosophy (ānvikṣikī), the three Vedas (trayī), economics (vārtā), and political science (daṇḍanīti) constitute the four branches of knowledge.

2.3 Adhering Dharma

In his governance, King Nala adhered strictly to rājadharma. Under his rule, even unrighteousness (adharmā) was compelled to take on the guise of righteousness (dharma):

padaiścaturbhissukṛte sthīrīkṛte kṛte'munā ke na tapaḥ prapedire /
bhuvam yadekāṅghrikaniṣṭhayā spṛśan dadhāvadharmo'pi kṛśastapasvitām //¹⁹

With his steadfast adherence to the fourfold virtue, who did not engage in austerities? Even adharmā, touching the earth with just one foot, was forced to become an ascetic under his reign.

That is, when King Nala firmly established the righteous path (sukṛta dharma) on all four pillars, who in the Kṛtayuga did not engage in austerities? Indeed, everyone became engrossed in penance because even the weak and adharmā (unrighteousness), standing on one leg, began performing penance with its foot touching the earth. In King Nala's kingdom, dharma was upheld everywhere based on truth (satya), non-stealing (asteya), self-restraint (śama), and discipline (dama).

King Nala is believed to have been born in the Tretā Yuga. Yet, through his virtues, he established the full extent of dharma even in the Tretā Yuga, bringing about an era akin to the Satya Yuga, where dharma



walked firmly on all four legs, and adharma, standing on one leg, was compelled to perform penance. A king must always strive for the establishment of dharma everywhere. People should act righteously, and such conduct among the subjects is possible only when they are made prosperous in every way. A person enriched with knowledge and wealth alone can act according to dharma. In essence, dharma signifies the performance of duty. Where there is a strong sense of duty, there exists both dharma and prosperity.

2.4 A Prosperous King

The people in King Nala's kingdom were prosperous in all respects, and their prosperity was acknowledged even by neighboring states.²⁰ In rājadharmā, the welfare of the people is paramount. Śrīharṣa asserts that a king who abandons the principles of rājadharmā is unworthy of ruling the earth:

na vāsa योग्या vastudheyamīdrśastvamaṅga ! yasyāḥ patirujjhitasthitih /
iti prahāya kṣitimāśritā nabhaḥ jagastamācukruśūrāravaiḥ khalu // ²¹

That is, O King! A land whose ruler abandons his duty is unfit for habitation. Thus, the earth, forsaken, soared into the sky like a bird, crying out in lamentation as if condemning the king. In the realm of an unprincipled king, righteous individuals cannot thrive. Such a ruler is not only criticized by humans but also by birds.

Even the Arthasāstra correctly states:

vidyāvinīto rājā hi prajānām vinaye rataḥ /
ananyām pṛthivīm bhūkte sarvabhūtahite rataḥ // ²²

2.5 Welfare of Subjects

That is, a learned king who remains devoted to the welfare of all beings and is diligent in the governance and education of his subjects rules the earth unchallenged for a long time. This is the fundamental principle of rājadharmā, upon which the acquisition and expansion of a kingdom depend. In this vision, the minister plays an equally significant role alongside the king.

In the great epic Naiṣadhīyacaritam, the dignified conduct of ministers and physicians is extolled. Ministers and physicians were not prohibited from entering the royal women's quarters (antaḥpura). It is said in this regard:

kanyāntaḥpurabodhanāya yadadhīkārānna doṣā nṛpaṁ
dvau mantripravarāśca tulyamagadaṅkāraśca tāmūcatuḥ /
devākarṇāya suśrutena carakasyoktena jāne'khilam
syādasyā naladam vinā na dalane tāpasya ko'pi kṣamaḥ // ²³

That is, there is no fault in a minister or physician entering the antaḥpura for the well-being of a princess. Both the chief minister and the royal physician of King Bhīma of Kuṇḍinapura expressed the same view. They asserted that, according to Suśruta and Caraka, none but Nala could alleviate Damayantī's afflictions. The minister's statement implied: "Having carefully listened to Suśruta and Caraka, I now fully understand that no one except King Nala (nalada) is capable of relieving Damayantī's distress."

2.6 Ministry of Administration

Thus, the minister not only provided political counsel to the king but also family advisor. The minister was deemed responsible for the overall administration. It was also his duty to ensure that no immoral or



reprehensible actions occurred within the antaḥpura. The Arthaśāstra appropriately cites the opinion of Ācārya Viśālākṣa in this regard:

sahakrīḍitatvāt paribhavantyenam / yeh'yasya guhyasadharmāṅastānamātyān kurvīta /
samānaśīlavasyanatvāt / te hyasya marmajñabhayānnāparādhyantīti // ²⁴

That is, Ācārya Viśālākṣa states that due to shared childhood play and companionship, fellow students (sahapāṭhī) may disregard the authority of the king. Therefore, ministers should be chosen from among those who have assisted the king in confidential matters. Their shared character and common interests prevent them from betraying the king due to fear of exposing secrets.

Thus, the selection of a minister is of paramount importance for a king. The prosperity of a kingdom flourishes through the harmonious coordination between the king and his minister. History bears witness that wherever discord existed between a king and his minister, the kingdom faced decline. A minister should never abandon his rājadharma and must always advise the king for the prosperity, peace, and welfare of the state.

Vidura, the minister of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Rākṣasa, the minister of Nanda, are exemplary figures who faithfully upheld their duties. The king is also responsible for protecting the territorial boundaries of his realm, which is a testament to his warrior spirit. Śrīharṣa illustrates King Nala's valor as follows:

mahārathasyādhvani cakravartinaḥ parānapekṣodvahanādyaśassitam /
radāvadātāmśumiṣādanīdṛṣām hasantamantarbalamarvatām raveḥ // ²⁵

2.7 A Warrior Par Excellence

That is, the great warrior and universal sovereign (cakravartin) King Nala, needing no assistance, bore his burden with unparalleled glory. The sun's horses, appearing to struggle under the weight of their task, seemed to smile inwardly at their own power.

This implies that while the sun's seven horses collectively bear its burden, King Nala's horse alone carried its mighty sovereign. Here, the imagery of the horse's tail and mane subtly alludes to the cāmara-wielding attendants of the king.²⁶ Indeed; the cāmara and the royal umbrella (chatra) are symbolic emblems of kingship.

King Nala was always victorious over his enemies through his valor. Concerning him, it is said:

analpadagdhāripurānalojjvalairnijapratāpairvalayam jvalad bhuvah /
pradakṣiṇīkṛtya jayāya sṛṣṭayā rarāja nīrājanayā sa rājaghaḥ // ²⁷

That is, with his immense prowess, which shone like the flames consuming enemy cities, he circled the earth, glowing like a sacred lamp, illuminating his conquests in all directions.

That is, King Nala, the destroyer of enemy rulers, encircled the land ablaze with his dazzling radiance, akin to a fire consuming the vast cities of his adversaries. He was adorned with the resplendence of the ceremonial āratī performed in his honor upon his victorious return. The essence of this statement is that when the king returned triumphant, the royal priests and others would perform āratī for him. Describing King Nala's military strength, it has been said:

yadasya yātrāsu baloddhataim rajaḥ sphuratpratāpānaladhūmamañjima /



tadeva gatvā patitaṁ sudhāmbudhau dadhāti pañkībhavadankatām vidhau // ²⁸

That is, in King Nala's victorious expeditions, the dust raised by his mighty army, resembling the smoke of a blazing fire of valor, reached the Kṣīrasāgara (Ocean of Nectar), where it turned into mud, marking the moon with its dark blemish (Kṛṣṇa Cihna). In this way, ample emphasis has been placed on the sovereignty and military strength of King Nala. The military power of a kingdom is what ensures both external and internal order and discipline.

2.8 Secured Treasury

Among the seven limbs (saptāṅga) of a kingdom, the kośa (treasury) holds immense significance. The treasury is the backbone of a well-organized state and serves as the regulator of the people's welfare and prosperity. Regarding King Nala's treasury, it has been stated:

jagajjayaṁ tena ca kośamakṣayaṁ praṇītavān śaiśavaśeṣavānayaṁ /
sakhā ratīśasya ṛturyathā vanam vapustathāliṅgadathāsyā yauvanam // ²⁹

That is, this sixteen-year-old King Nala conquered the world and made his treasury inexhaustible. Just as spring arrives as the companion of Kāma, the Lord of Love, in the same way, youth embraced his body. King Nala's treasury was inexhaustible. By launching campaigns against various nations, he amassed countless riches, rendering his treasury limitless. Among the many means prescribed for a nation's prosperity and security, the kośa is of paramount importance. The chief officer overseeing financial affairs was called the samāhartā, responsible for collecting the state's revenue from different societal classes, various goods, villages, cities, households, merchants, artisans, and land. This collected wealth was known as kara (tax). Taxation is a crucial instrument for the economic advancement of any state or country. The wealth obtained from taxation enables the king to implement welfare schemes for the people, as appropriately explained in the Raghuvamśam Mahākāvya:

prajānāmeva bhūtyartha sa tābhyo balimagrahīta /
sahasraguṇabhūtsṛṣṭumādatte hi rasam raviḥ // ³⁰

That is, just as the sun absorbs water from the earth through its rays only to return it a thousand fold in the form of rain, similarly, King Dilīpa collected taxes from his subjects and spent them entirely for their welfare.

2.9 Well-Protected Fort

The Yājñavalkya Smṛti states that to protect his people, treasury, and himself, a king must construct a durga (fort), which should be aesthetically pleasing, suitable for rearing livestock, a means of livelihood, and surrounded by forests.³¹ In the Naiṣadhīyacaritam, it is mentioned that a king's city should be so fortified that no enemy can ever capture it:

parikhāvalayacchalena yā na pareṣāṁ grahaṇasya gocarā /
phaṇibhāṣitabhaṣyaphakkikā viṣamām kuṇḍalanā mavāpitā // ³²

That is, the city was encircled by moats in a circular formation, making it inaccessible to enemies just as the esoteric teachings of the great sage Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya were coiled in secrecy like the hissing of a serpent. The meaning here is that, according to legend, Vararuci had concealed the phakkikā (a specific portion) of the Mahābhāṣya in such a way that only the worthy could decipher it. Similarly, King Bhīma's city, Kuṇḍinapurī, was fortified with an impenetrable moat, preventing enemies from ever capturing it.



2.10 An Incarnation of Justice

King Nala administered justice with great diligence. He himself was as compassionate as a sage and was deeply moved by sentiments of mercy:

phalena mūlena ca vāriḥhūruhām munerivettham mama yasya vṛttayaḥ /
tvayā'dya tasminnapi daṇḍadhāriṇā katham na patyā dharaṇī hṛṇīyate // ³³

That is, "My life is sustained by the fruits and roots of waterborne plants, like that of a sage so how is it that the earth does not feel ashamed today because of you, its ruler who wields the rod of punishment?" This statement was made by a swan (haṁsa), and it instilled a sense of compassion in the king's heart.

2.11 Secret Counsel

Regarding mantra (state secrets and counsel), the Yājñavalkya Smṛti states:

mantramūlam yato rājyam tasmānmantram surakṣitam /
kuryādyathā'sya na viduḥ karmaṇā mā phalodayāt // ³⁴

That is, since governance is rooted in secret counsel (mantra), the king must always keep his strategies confidential. Until success is achieved, the king should never reveal his plans. The same principle is emphasized in the Arthaśāstra:

tasmānnāsyā pare viduḥ karma kiñcicaccikīrṣitam /
ārābdhāstu jānīyurārābdham kṛtameva ca // ³⁵

That is, others should never know what the king intends to do. Only those entrusted with the task should be aware of the plan when it is initiated and when it is executed.

That is, no one other than the king should be aware of confidential deliberations. Only those who execute the tasks should have an inkling of them, and they should come to know the outcome only after the completion of the work. In this manner, Śrīharṣa has thoroughly explained the seven limbs (saptāṅga) of the state. The six royal strategies (ṣaḍguṇya) also hold great significance in rājadharmā, as they define the nature of a king. King Nala, too, was endowed with these six strategies. Regarding the ṣaḍguṇya, it is stated:

sam̐dhiṁ ca vighraṁ yānamāsanam sam̐śrayam̐ tathā /
dvaidhībhāvam̐ guṇānetān yathāvatparikalpayet // ³⁶

That is, sam̐dhi (treaty), vighra (war), yāna (marching against an enemy), āsana (strategic inaction or waiting), sam̐śraya (seeking protection), and dvaidhībhāva (creating division) are the six royal attributes. Their application should be based on the prevailing circumstances. Essentially, sam̐dhi ensures stability. Vighra pertains to enmity and hostility due to harm inflicted by others. Yāna refers to advancing against another king. Āsana denotes either neglecting an enemy or an ally or waiting for an opportune moment for a specific action. If a king lacks sufficient military strength, seeking the protection of a powerful ruler is termed sam̐śraya. Dividing one's own forces or creating discord within an enemy king's strength is known as dvaidhībhāva. The king must employ these strategies as per the demands of time and situation.

2.12 Svayambara Tradition

The Naiṣadhīyacaritam also elaborates on the svayambara tradition as part of royal administration. Kings organized svayambaras for their daughters' marriages, a practice also mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇam,



Mahābhāratam, Raghuvamśam and other texts. In a svayambara, a princess had the liberty to choose her husband based on his appearance, virtues, and valor. The same tradition is depicted here as well:

katipayadivasairvayasyayā vaḥ svayamabhilaṣya variṣyate varīyān /

kṛśiṃśamanayānāyā tadāptum rucirucitātha bhavadvidhābhidhābhiḥ // ³⁷

That is, the king said, “In a few days, your friend Damayantī will, of her own accord, select a worthy groom. Therefore, at present, it is appropriate for you, her companions, to counsel her so that she may regain her radiance by overcoming her emaciation.”

2.13 Honouring Guests

In rājadharmā, great importance is also given to honoring guests (atithi satkāra). This idea is similarly reflected here:

pārthivam hi nijamājiṣu vīrā dūramūrdhvagamanasya virodhi /

gauravādvapurapāsyā bhajante matkṛtāmatithigauravaṛddhim // ³⁸

That is, valiant men are born of the earth and are thus naturally opposed to excessive ascension (ūrdhvagamana). By relinquishing their bodies in battle, they attain the honor and grandeur of hospitality (atithi-gaurava), which I have bestowed upon them. This signifies that honoring guests is of the utmost prestige.

Doubt (saṃśaya) is considered a sin here. It is the root of all misfortunes. It has been said:

tadvimṛjya mama saṃśayaśilpi sphītamatra viṣaye sahasāgham /

bhūyatām bhagavataḥ śrutisārairadya vāgbhiraghamarṣaṇaṅgbhiḥ // ³⁹

That is, “O remover of my doubts, cleanse away this sin that has grown strong in my heart regarding this matter. Let your words, which are the essence of the Vedas, today become the sacred hymns (ṛcās) that dispel sin and are nectar-like to the ears.” The implication is that Indra, who had developed doubts regarding the kings of the earthly realm, found this uncertainty as painful as sin. He requested Nārada to provide some insights to dispel his doubts. Doubt is indeed a sin, and Nārada’s words serve as the ṛcās that eliminate sin.

Thus, we observe that the poet has not merely attempted to impart lessons on rājadharmā through the tale of Nala and Damayantī but has also made them practical. The descriptions of the royal settings of King Nala and King Bhīma are presented in such a way that they provide an immediate understanding of rājadharmā. By thoroughly analyzing rājadharmā, Śrīharṣa, through his masterpiece Naiṣadhīyacaritam, provides evidence of its cultural context. Here, kings, ministers, the state, treasury, fortifications, secret deliberations (mantra), and elements like saṃdhi and vighraha are described in an effortless manner, thereby enriching the political landscape of the twelfth century.

2.14 Intelligence Inputs

King Nala, though he gathered intelligence on the entire kingdom through his secret agents (guptacara), always acted based on his own judgment and wisdom. It seemed as if even opposing natures, like rival kings, had abandoned their mutual conflicts out of fear of Nala. “If Brāhmaṇas perceive the world through the eyes of the Vedas, then kings have the ability to see through the fourfold vision of their spies (guptacara).” The term āptapuruṣa (trusted agent) and cara (spy) are used to refer to secret agents. In the Amarakośa, it is stated:



“cāraś ca gūḍhapuruṣaḥ”

That is, a cāra (spy) is a concealed agent. A king is metaphorically called “four-eyed” because these spies reported the truth to him. Any information conveyed by them regarding an event was considered reliable. The king was not satisfied merely by the success of their missions but rather by their sincere service. Śrīharṣa stated that in Naiṣadhīyacaritam:

pratīpabhūpairiva kiṃ tato bhiyā viruddhadharmairapi bhetrtojhitā /
amitrajinmitrajidojasā sa yadvicāradṛkcāradṛgapyavartata //
gandhena gāvaḥ paśyanti brāhmaṇāvedacakṣuṣā /
cāraiḥ paśyanti rājānaścakṣubhyamitarejanā // ⁴⁰

3. CONCLUSION

The concept of kingship in Śrīharṣa's Naiṣadhīyacaritam is a sophisticated blend of dharma, artha, and cultural ideals. King Nala emerges as an epitome of the ideal ruler, integrating wisdom, justice, and valor. By drawing from the rich traditions of dharmasāstra and arthasāstra, Śrīharṣa's poetic masterpiece provides a timeless discourse on governance and leadership. The poet has portrayed the kingship of Nala as an incarnation of Dharma who has come to this earth to protect people and deliver justice. In his eyes an ideal king has to follow Dharma and enjoy his power by practicing it. All the qualities that one king should have, king Nala possesses all those and hence an ideal king who is accepted by everybody at that time. His valour, strategy to conquer enemy, power to rule with religious order gave all that one ideal ruler has to have. Hence the great poet Śrīharṣa has proved him as the best one among other kings who could fulfill the necessities of people and satisfy them from all points. This study highlights the text's relevance in understanding ancient Indian political philosophy and its enduring legacy in Sanskrit literature.

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6. P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasāstras (Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law), Volume III, pp. 34–35
7. Cf., Arthasāstra, 1.13
8. Mahābhārata, 12.67.12–16
9. arājake janapade svakaṃ bhavati kasyacit /
matsyā iva janā nityaṃ bhakṣayanti parasparam // Rāmāyaṇa, 2.67.31
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