

# Beyond the Vedas: Reimagining Civic Responsibility for Modern Times

Civic sense may be broadly understood as social ethics. It comprises inherent discipline and a sense of responsibility that citizens must possess for fellow human beings as well as their country. It unequivocally forms the foundation of national development and progress. India at present is poised to become a world leader with prominent economic growth, rapid infrastructure expansion, and an increasing global presence. However, the next quantum leap will be hastened by bringing about a transformation in the behaviour and attitudes of people with regard to civic responsibility. There are modern laws and institutions which regulate behaviour but they cannot create trust, empathy or self-restraint that comes from within and can be described as "civic spirituality", which means, the consciousness that "I am part of a larger whole - a city, a nation, humanity - and my actions must reflect responsibility, compassion and integrity towards that whole". It is, thus, a bridge between "inner values" and "outer citizenship". It can also be termed as 'ethical discipline'.

The idea of ethical discipline embedded within the Buddhist and Jain philosophy can be appropriated to inculcate civic consciousness among Indian citizens. These ancient affirmations can effectively play a positive role in cultivating integrity in people. Ethical discipline transforms civic duties from forced legal obligations into deeply held personal convictions. When we practice ethical discipline, we inadvertently align our daily actions with moral principles like fairness, integrity, and accountability, even without supervision. This self-consciousness naturally makes one a more conscientious member of the community and country. Its dimensions include: (1) duty beyond self (*Kartavya*), (2) empathy and compassion (*Karuna*), (3) integrity and truth (*Satya* and *Ritama*), sense of belonging (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*) and (5) equanimity and restraint.

The sixth century BCE in India witnessed the emergence of heterodox sects like Jainism and Buddhism, which challenged ritual authority and varna-based prescriptions. Their rigorous debates concerning nonviolence, karma, and renunciation enriched the existing discourse, pluralizing what counted as righteous conduct.

The Buddhist *pancha-shila* and the Jain *anuvrata* are important concepts, both of which translate moral discipline into everyday conduct. Their continuing importance lies not only in personal salvation within the religious domain, but also in the cultivation of citizens capable of trust, restraint, and responsibility. These traditions offer a compelling moral basis for civic duty in the contemporary milieu.

The Buddhist *pancha-shila*, or five precepts, are the basic ethical commitments expected of lay Buddhists- non-monastic practitioners who form the majority of the Buddhist community. These include,



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abstaining from killing of living beings, not taking what is not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from false speech, and abstaining from intoxicants.

The significance of these tenets transcends the ambit of personal virtues. Each precept possesses a public dimension. Abstention from killing translates into respect for life, empathy for fellow humans and rejection of cruelty; not stealing results in honesty in dealing with common resources; not lying turns into defense of truthful public discourse; and avoiding intoxicants ensures responsible conduct. In the context of society, the five foundational ethical principles outline the personal self-control needed to foster mutual trust among citizens.

न हि वेरेन वेरानि, सम्मत्तौघ कुदाचनं।  
अवेरेन च सम्मन्ति, एस धम्मो सनन्तनो॥  
(*Dhammapada*, verse 5, *Khuddaka Nikaya*)

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.

Within the Jain framework, the *anuvrata*, or "small vows," serve a similar role for lay followers. These are moderate forms of the great vows (*mahavratas*) and include abstinence from violence, falsehood, and stealing, along with contentment with one's own wife and limiting one's possessions. The primary moral imperative here is restraint. Jain ethics do not regard desire as benign. Unbridled want is seen to have the potential to produce harm, possessiveness, and exploitation. In a civic society, such restraint is remarkably pertinent because public life depends on an individual's ability to restrict self-interest for the larger common good.

जो सहस्सं सहस्साणं, संगामे दुज्जयं जिणे।  
एकं जिणेज्ज अप्पाणं, एष से परमो जिओ॥  
(*Uttaradhyayana sutra* 9.34)

One may conquer thousands of un-conquerable enemies in battle; but he who conquers his single self wins the ultimate victory.

The Buddhist and Jain traditions converge on the same principle, namely, that a disciplined population forms the building blocks of a good society. We often find civic duties couched in legal language such as following the law, paying taxes, safeguarding public property, and respecting others' rights. However, law on its own is not sufficient to sustain a robust nation. If citizens lie uninhibitedly, exploit resources without thinking, or engage in aggressive behaviour, institutions weaken from within. The Buddhist emphasis on right speech and the Jain emphasis on truthfulness both suggest that truthful speech is indispensable for civic order.

This is precisely why these ethical concepts resonate strongly in the current climate. High rates of crime is not the only factor that threatens modern civic life. It is also endangered by indifference, misinformation, excessive consumption, and the erosion of responsibility. The precept against false speech is especially important in the age of social media, where rumours and deliberate distortions tend to spread faster than facts. They can prove to be especially detrimental in the field of health and wellness, where incorrect information on diets, medicines and treatment of diseases can lead to serious harm to gullible people who follow these advices without verifying.

In a similar vein, the vow against not taking what is not given speaks to corruption, bribery, and misuse of public assets. The Jain principle of *aparigraha* or limiting possessions is tremendously relevant in an epoch where consumerism is eclipsing rationality, leading to environmental strain. Both traditions drive home the fact that civic failure often begins with everyday moral neglect.

The importance of Buddhist and Jain precepts extends into fostering social harmony. Civic duty is not simply limited to exhibiting obedience to law. It is care for coexistence and consideration for fellow human beings. The *pancha-shila* and *anuvrata* encourage kindness, self-restraint, and truthfulness, which are the values needed in diverse societies. India's plural public life depends on people who can disagree without harbouring hatred, pursue ambition without exploiting the vulnerable, and seek progress while maintaining ethical balance.

It is crucial to note that these principles should not be understood as being restrictive in a negative sense. They are enabling. Imbibing these would facilitate smoother societal conditions in which cooperation between people would be greatly enhanced. Civic duty is then not a burden imposed from outside but a form of moral participation. The state can enforce rules, but it cannot build character. Our ancient traditions can achieve that by shaping conscience and thereby conduct. This makes *pancha-shila* and *anuvrata* especially valuable in education, community life, and public service.

## Fable with Moral

### Bhasmasura



The story of Bhasmasura is a popular Indian mythological tale deeply engrained in Indian oral traditions and regional literature that cautions us about the dangers of unbridled ego, greed, and the misuse of power. It appears with slight variations in the *Bagavat Purana*, *Shiva Purana* and the *Sthala puranas*.

Bhasmasura was a powerful demon who performed intense penance to please Lord Shiva. Satisfied with his devotion, Shiva appeared and granted him a boon. Bhasmasura asked for immortality, but since that was against the laws of nature, Shiva refused. Instead, the demon asked for a unique power- anyone whose head he touched with his hand should immediately burn to ashes. Shiva granted the boon.

Driven by arrogance and malicious intent, Bhasmasura decided to test the power on Shiva himself to take over the universe and possess Shiva's wife, Goddess Parvati. Terrified and threatened by the demon's pursuit, Shiva fled and sought help from Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the universe.

Vishnu formulated a clever plan to trick the demon. He transformed himself into Mohini, an exquisitely beautiful dancer. When Bhasmasura saw Mohini, he was completely enchanted by her beauty and forgot about his ambition of capturing Shiva. He persuaded Mohini to marry him. Mohini agreed, but on one condition, that Bhasmasura had to match her dance moves with precision.

Blinded by lust and ego, Bhasmasura eagerly agreed. As they danced, Mohini performed intricate steps, and the demon copied each one flawlessly. Eventually, Mohini struck a pose where she placed her hand on her own head. Without thinking, Bhasmasura mirrored the gesture and placed his hand on his own head. The deadly boon instantly triggered, and the demon was reduced to a heap of ashes.

**Moral of the Fable**  
Conquer your inner arrogance before it transforms into a force of self-destruction.

## Did you know?

**Did You Know Kautilya Treated Roads, Wells and Traveller Safety as Administrative Duties?**

In the *Arthashastra*, the safety and maintenance of travel routes was assigned to *Vivatadhyaksa* or the Superintendent of Pasture Lands. However, his responsibilities extended beyond managing grazing areas. He was expected to examine travellers' passes, maintain roads, watch over wilderness routes, arrest thieves and ensure the safety of mercantile traffic.

The text directs that pasture grounds should be opened between dangerous places and that valleys should be cleared of threats posed by thieves, wild elephants and other animals. The superintendent was also charged with protecting timber forests, elephant forests and cattle while keeping commercial routes operational. The *Arthashastra* also refers to *prapas*, places where water was supplied freely to travellers, as



recognised features of the administrative landscape. Roads, irrigation works, feeding houses, pasture grounds and public water points were to be identified and recorded while village and territorial boundaries were being established.

From a governance perspective, the arrangement linked infrastructure, policing, communication and economic policy. The *Arthashastra* recognised that secure mobility encouraged trade, protected state revenues and connected distant parts of the kingdom.

## UNJUMBLE

1. Unjumble these scrambled words to form the terms often used in the governance of Ancient India:

MTAAAY

HUTIROP

GARAM

YAJAR

2. Arrange the circled letters to answer the following:

The Supreme Ruler: \_\_\_\_\_



## Marvels of India

### THE ASHOKAN EDICTS

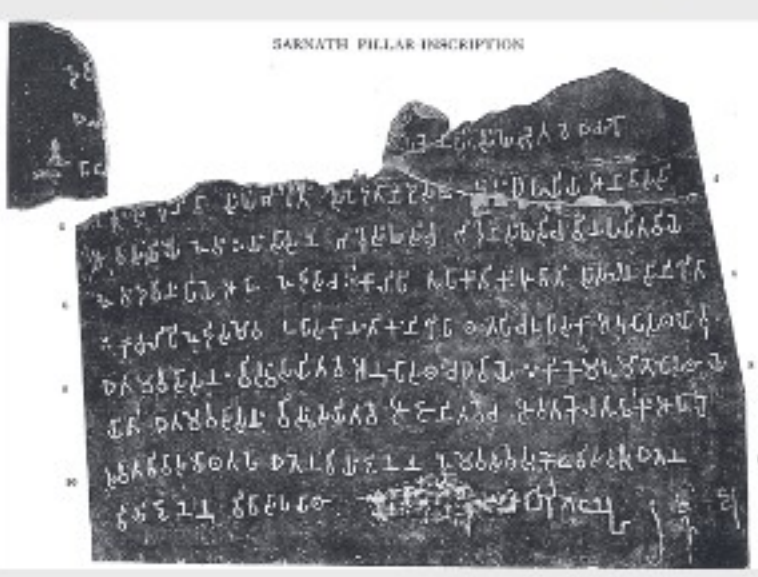
A Marvel of Effective and Efficient Communication The Mauryan emperor Ashoka used inscriptions on rocks and pillars as his primary instrument of statecraft. These proclamations communicated his policies, administrative instructions and ethical teachings directly to the masses, mostly in Prakrit, using the Brahmi script so that ordinary subjects could understand them. These were strategically placed along trade routes, near borders and at administrative centres to unify a vast, diverse empire through moral governance.

**Institutionalising Welfare**

Rock Edicts III and IV show Ashoka consulting his council of ministers on both routine and emergency matters. At the same time, officials called *Mahamattas* were tasked with promoting his moral order/norm/code of conduct or his socio-cultural policy termed *Dhamma*, overseeing administration and safeguarding the frontier provinces. Other edicts detail administrative measures to improve public benevolence, healthcare, general wellbeing of the populace etc.

**An Enduring Governance Model**

Some historians call this "conquest by *Dhamma*", i.e., rule sustained through good administration and paternal concern for subjects, rather than force, making Ashokan inscriptions among human history's earliest documented royal orders creating and shaping a form of governance that was anchored in and driven from *Dharma* (righteous and just behaviour).



## QUIZ Governance

| Questions                                                                                                                                     | Option A                                     | Option B                      | Option C                     | Option D                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. How were the Paiks who provided specialized non-manual services (such as artisans, clerks, scribes) classified in the Ahom administration? | Chamua                                       | Kanri                         | Likson                       | Got                           |
| 2. Which feature was common to both the Kushan and Saka administrations?                                                                      | Provinces under military governors (Satraps) | Hereditary joint rule         | Divine theory of kingship    | A, B & C                      |
| 3. Which earlier empire's governance structure heavily influenced the Satavahana dynasty?                                                     | Chola                                        | Mauryan                       | Gupta                        | Kushan                        |
| 4. What was special about Gopala I from the Pala dynasty coming to power during extreme political chaos around modern-day Bengal?             | Appointment by Buddhist monks                | Capture through military coup | Election by political elites | Selection by a Vardhana ruler |
| 5. Which of these queens from Kannauj (U.P.) took active steps to maintain India-China cultural ties?                                         | Prabhavati-gupta                             | Dattadevi                     | Kumaradevi                   | Didda                         |

Answers: 1 - A, 2 - D, 3 - B, 4 - C, 5 - C

## नेट-वर्क

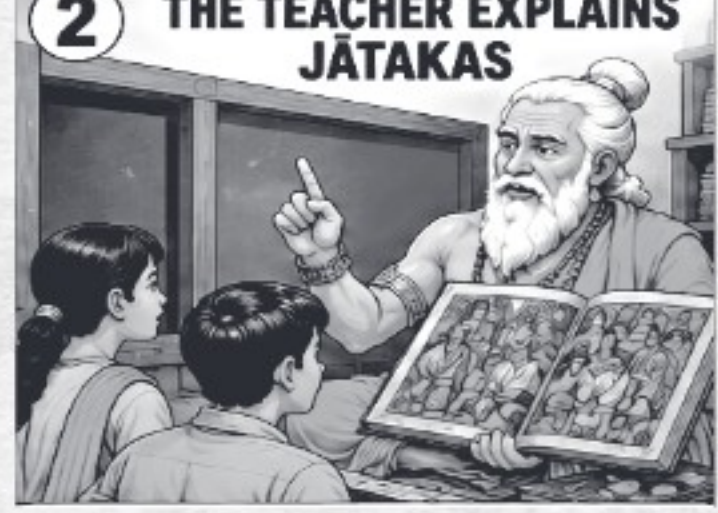
## The SIBI Jataka

**1 DISCOVERY OF THE AJANTA PAINTINGS**



A GROUP OF STUDENTS VISIT AJANTA CAVES AND ADMIRE THE ANCIENT PAINTINGS.

**2 THE TEACHER EXPLAINS JĀTAKAS**



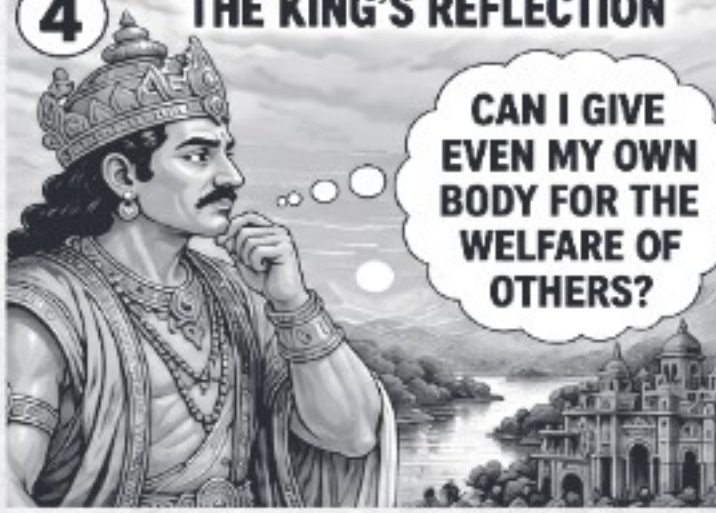
THE TEACHER EXPLAINS THAT JĀTAKAS ARE STORIES OF BUDDHA'S PREVIOUS BIRTHS WHICH TEACH HIGH VALUES AND SELFLESS DEEDS.

**3 KING SIBI – A GENEROUS RULER**



KING SIBI WAS BELOVED BY HIS PEOPLE. HE ALWAYS HELPED THE POOR AND CARED FOR EVERYONE'S WELFARE.

**4 THE KING'S REFLECTION**



CAN I GIVE EVEN MY OWN BODY FOR THE WELFARE OF OTHERS?

THE KING'S RELECTION

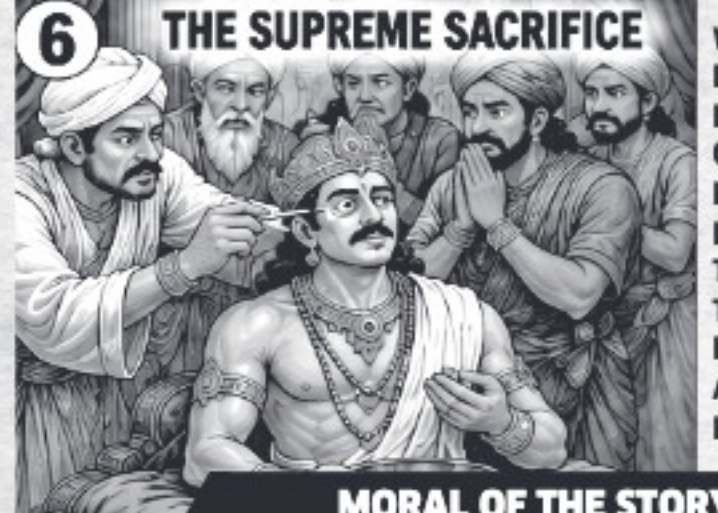
**5 THE DIVINE TEST**



O KING! GIVE ME ONE EYE.

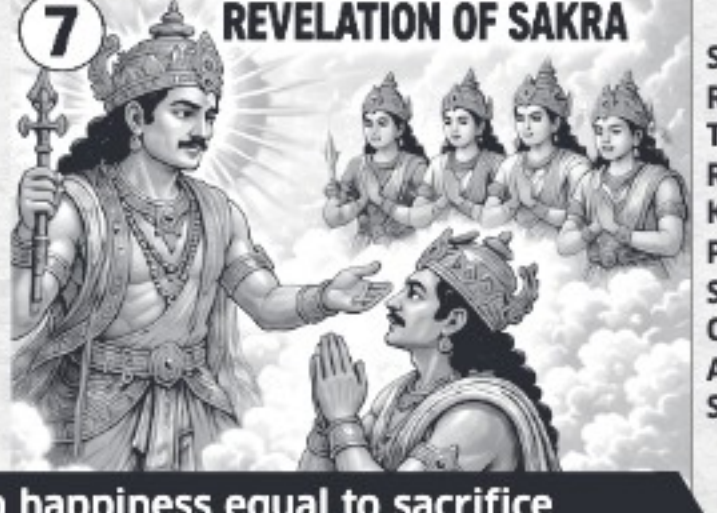
DISGUISED AS A BLIND BEGGAR (SAKRA), THE GOD KING INDRA ASKED KING SIBI FOR ONE OF HIS EYES.

**6 THE SUPREME SACRIFICE**



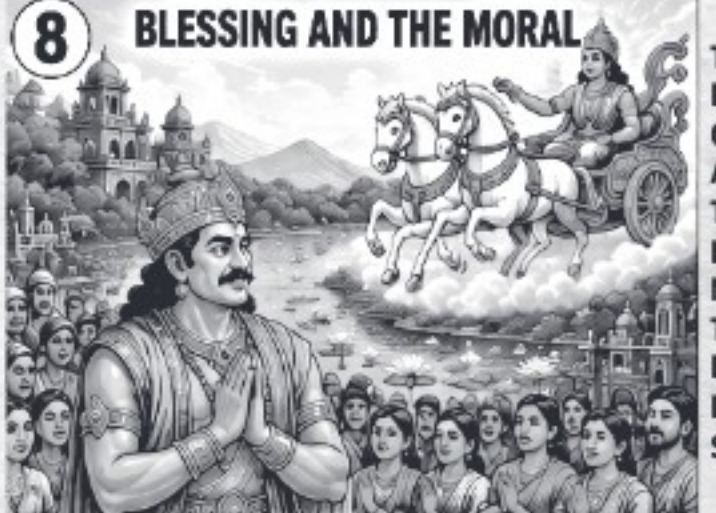
WITHOUT HESITATION, KING SIBI OFFERED BOTH HIS EYES TO THE BEGGAR, SAYING THAT HIS VOW TO HELP THE DISTRESSED IS ABOVE EVERYTHING.

**7 REVELATION OF SAKRA**



SAKRA REVEALED HIS TRUE FORM AND RESTORED THE KING'S EYES. HE PRAISED KING SIBI'S COURAGE, COMPASSION AND SELFLESS SACRIFICE.

**8 BLESSING AND THE MORAL**



THE KING WAS BLESSED WITH GREAT VISION AND WISDOM. TRUE WELTH LIES IN GIVING, NOT IN KEEPING. THERE IS NO HAPPINESS EQUAL TO SACRIFICE.

**MORAL OF THE STORY:** There is no happiness equal to sacrifice