

National Highways and the Viksit Bharat Vision: Ethical Statecraft and Infrastructure-Led Development under the Narendra Modi Government

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Abstract

Infrastructure-driven growth is a fundamental component of India's long-term strategy, termed Viksit Bharat 2047. The expansion of National Highways is a significant institutional and spatial intervention. The construction of highways extends beyond mere economic and logistical responsibilities. It also illustrates profound convictions regarding the country's responsibility in establishing the appropriate conditions for societal stability and advancement. This paper situates the ongoing construction of the National Highway within the philosophical frameworks of Indian political thinking, wherein administration is perceived as an ethical-administrative obligation intended to promote prosperity, territorial unity, and social stability.

The approach employs ancient political notions like *Artha*, *Dharma*, and *Rājadharmā* to interpret highways as instruments of economic development and mechanisms of moral governance that facilitate the enactment and legitimization of political authority. Indian political thought has emphasized the importance of circulation, connectivity, and administrative scope in sustaining economic vibrancy and political cohesion. The paper offers a normative understanding of infrastructure as a civilizational activity, rather than a simple technocratic endeavour, by re-evaluating key conceptual assumptions. The paper establishes a conceptual framework linking traditional political philosophy to contemporary governance practices, viewing the advancement of National Highways as a culturally significant and ethically justified component of the developmental trajectory of India. This contributes to broader concerns regarding infrastructure, governance, and the sustainability of civilization within development rhetoric.

Keywords: Viksit Bharat 2047, National Highways, Indian Political Thought, Infrastructure-Led Development, *Rājadharmā*

Introduction

Infrastructure has reasserted its strategic significance in India's developmental discourse, particularly with the long-term national vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. National Highways are distinguished from other infrastructure types by their capacity to transform economic dynamics, facilitate governmental operations,

and enhance national cohesion. Contemporary policy debates on highway construction mostly concentrate on enhancing efficiency, usability, and expeditious expansion. While analytically important, these perspectives occasionally undermine the deep philosophical foundations that have historically influenced the comprehension of infrastructure within the Indian political framework.

Indian political thought presents a normative framework in which material advancement is fundamentally connected to ethical governance and institutional responsibility. Classical traditions viewed roads and connectivity not as neutral technological assets, but as integral to broader concepts of governmental duty, social welfare, and political coherence. Re-examining these philosophical foundations enables a more sophisticated evaluation of modern highway-driven progress, moving beyond merely technical or economic interpretations.

This paper utilizes a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on political-philosophical analysis. The Indian political literature, particularly in the fields of statecraft and governance, is examined alongside contemporary infrastructure policy frameworks to identify conceptual continuities rather than empirical causes. The research employs a normative-theoretical framework to situate National Highway development within a broader civilizational discourse on governance, development, and state accountability. This paper advances interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating that Viksit Bharat 2047 constitutes both a developmental goal and a philosophically informed vision of governance, in which infrastructure functions as an ethical, integrative, and forward-looking instrument of the state.

1. Infrastructure and Governance in Indian Political Thought

Indian political philosophy incorporates infrastructure, particularly roads and walkways, into a holistic ethical and administrative governance framework. In the classical Indian tradition, governance extended beyond mere order maintenance and tax collection; it principally aimed at promoting social stability, economic circulation, and moral equilibrium. In ancient political theory, the concept of *Artha* encompassed not merely the accumulation of wealth but also the possession of essential resources for a fulfilling life. In this setting, infrastructure emerged as a fundamental necessity for ethical governance rather than a mere administrative concern.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* exemplifies this concept by assigning the state the responsibility of constructing and maintaining roadways, trading routes, and communication networks. Roads are often described as the kingdom's 'vital arteries' because they facilitate trade, troop deployment, governmental access, and public health (Deshkar, 2010, p. 89-91). The legitimacy of the ruler was closely associated with the effectiveness of these networks in facilitating trade and ensuring the safety of cross-border movement. Connectivity was fundamental to sovereignty, linking mobility with political authority and effective governance.

The *Dharmashastra* tradition reinforces this perspective by incorporating infrastructure into the moral responsibilities of kingship (*rājadharma*) (Bag & Padhan, 2025, p. 51). Individuals believed that public infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and resthouses, facilitated social justice by enhancing access to markets, economic and educational centres, pilgrimage sites, tourist spots and government facilities. Neglecting this type of infrastructure was not merely a governmental oversight; it was a moral failing, as it demonstrated the failure of the ruler to fulfil their obligations to the populace. This normative emphasis transforms infrastructure from a technical function to an element of ethical governance.

Indian philosophical traditions likewise underscore the integrative role of interconnectedness in preserving societal cohesion. Roads symbolized the linkage among various regions, towns, and economic zones, thus reinforcing the notion of a politically unified and administratively coherent entity (Deshkar, 2010, p. 90-

91). Infrastructure enabled the transportation of goods, ideas, and people, serving as a channel for maintaining political cohesion and cultural continuity. This understanding corresponds with the conventional view that the state must actively shape material conditions to preserve social order and collective well-being. In this philosophical framework, infrastructure is more precisely regarded as a moral duty of the state rather than a discretionary public service. The conventional Indian perspective on governance provides a normative foundation for contemporary infrastructure-driven development, wherein investments in connectivity, such as national highways, are regarded not merely as economic initiatives but also as instances of ethical statecraft. Indian political thought has historically justified viewing infrastructure as essential to nation-building and sustained prosperity by linking material progress to moral responsibility.

2. *Rājadharmā* and the Ethics of Connectivity

The notion of *Rājadharmā* situates political authority within an ethical context, designating the ruler with the duty of ensuring public welfare through effective and just governance (Bag & Padhan, 2025, p. 51). Classical Indian political thought consistently associates effective governance with the maintenance of order, security, and economic prosperity, all of which require reliable networks of transport. Within this normative framework, national highways functioned as instruments of governance, enabling taxation, defense, commerce, education, tourism and social interaction, so preserving both administrative unity and social stability (Turner, 1971, pp. 229-230).

The *Arthasāstra* and the *Dharmashāstras* elucidate that facilitating the movement of individuals and goods was not merely an ancillary responsibility of a monarch, but a fundamental obligation. The mobility of goods and individuals was essential for prosperity (*Artha*) and the accomplishment of moral duty (*Dharma*). Connectivity has consequently acquired ethical significance, linking physical infrastructure to the legitimacy of political authority. The development of contemporary national highways serves as a modern institutional embodiment of this traditional ethical justification. The state enhances access to markets, public services, and economic possibilities through the development and modernization of road networks, particularly across social and regional divides. In the context of Indian political ideology, such infrastructure investment transcends mere economic planning; it embodies the concept of *Rājadharmā*, signifying the state's moral obligation to foster community wealth through interconnectedness.

3. *Artha*, State Capacity and Economic Circulation

In Indian political philosophy, *Artha* signifies material prosperity sustained by institutional discipline and administrative efficacy, rather than by unrestricted wealth accumulation. Classical literature emphasizes that the state must effectively organize, regulate, and facilitate economic activity to generate revenue. The fundamental operation of *Artha* involves the circulation of things, labour, revenue, and information (Niaz, 2008, pp 10-11). This circulation relies on dependable physical connectivity. Consequently, roads are essential for economic organization as they translate the state's capabilities into tangible outcomes.

Kautilya's concept of governance underscores the necessity for governmental efficiency and economic robustness. The government's infrastructure initiatives mitigate transaction uncertainty and trade restrictions. This conceptual framework posits that roads serve as physical infrastructure that facilitates the movement of *Artha*, which is essential for production, exchange, and economic stability. Conversely, economic stagnation is indirectly associated with inadequate infrastructure and governmental neglect. The Modi administration's expansion of the National Highways exemplifies the conventional perspective on

economic circulation facilitated by state-enabled connectivity. Highway construction is regarded as a technique to mitigate regional fragmentation and enhance market integration by prioritizing network cohesion and logistical efficiency. From the standpoint of Indian political thought, this approach aligns with the idea that *Artha* flourishes when the state proactively sustains the conditions for circulation, emphasizing infrastructure as a crucial element of economic governance rather than merely a technical measure.

4. National Highway as Instruments of Territorial Integration

Indian political thinking has traditionally viewed geographical integration as an essential condition for political stability and sovereign power. Classical ideas of the state viewed territory not merely as a geographic expanse but as an administratively developed region, united by networks of communication and mobility. Roads facilitated the expansion of the authority, streamlined tax collection, and ensured governmental presence in regions with diverse cultures and ecosystems. This transformed space into a manageable and cohesive political entity.

This perspective on civilization prioritised unity through connection rather than dominance through bloodshed. Textual traditions associated efficient governance with the capacity to unite distant regions to political and economic hubs, facilitating the unification of individuals within common administrative and economic frameworks. Connectivity functioned as a unifying element that bolstered political stability and fostered a sense of shared identity.

In contemporary society, National Highways serve the analogous function of linking remote, interior, and border regions to national commercial and administrative networks ((Mahalingam, 1991, pp. 2821-2822)). The Viksit Bharat 2047 vision views highway construction as a means to link regions across the nation and enhance political unity, economic inclusion, and social cohesion. From the perspective of Indian political philosophy, this infrastructure-centric integration bolsters the civilizational principle of unity achieved by circulation and institutional presence rather than through coercive governance.

5. Governance Reform and the Renewal of Statecraft

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* conceives of statecraft as a rational, outcome-oriented framework in which political authority rests on administrative efficacy, institutional rigour, and accountability (Bag & Padhan, 2025, pp. 51-52). In this traditional framework, governance is evaluated based on performance rather than intent, particularly with respect to the state's capacity to execute public works that sustain economic activity and social order (Niaz, 2008, pp. 8-9). Infrastructure development, including road construction, is regarded as a crucial administrative responsibility that requires coordination, oversight, and timely execution.

The Modi administration's emphasis on efficiency, prompt implementation, and institutional reform in National Highway development embodies a contemporary interpretation of Kautilyan philosophy. The employed instruments—digital monitoring, public-private partnerships, and innovative purchasing methods—are contemporary; however, their foundational concept remains rooted in traditional statecraft: governance aimed at attaining specific objectives (Singh, 2010, pp. 20-21). This convergence demonstrates a link between ancient Indian political philosophy and contemporary governance techniques. The building of highways revitalizes ancient concepts of accountable governance by integrating Kautilyan ethical rationality with contemporary administrative competencies.

6. Viksit Bharat 2047: Civilisational Continuity and Developmental Vision

Viksit Bharat 2047 can be viewed as a civilizational initiative designed to align economic modernization with the enduring moral tenets of Indian political thought. Classical philosophy conceived of expansion as continuity rather than disruption, requiring that material progress (*Artha*) operate within ethical limits (*Dharma*) and institutional responsibilities (*Rājadharma*). This intellectual tradition regarded long-term public works as indicators of effective governance, linking current governmental actions to future social stability (Paul & John, 2025, pp. 442-444). National Highways, as enduring and extensive public assets, exemplify the integration of long-term strategic planning with ethical governance. Their magnitude and durability indicate the government's commitment to long-term development, consistent with the perspective of classical thinkers, who regarded infrastructure as a moral and political investment rather than a transient policy adjustment. National Highways function as concrete embodiments of civilizational continuity, converting philosophical ideals into geographical and economic realities. From this perspective, highway-driven growth in Viksit Bharat 2047 transcends ordinary technocratic planning and has normative significance (Paul & John, 2025, pp. 446-447). It represents a culturally rooted understanding of progress, wherein interconnectedness, integration, and prosperity are pursued as extensions of India's political-philosophical legacy, emphasizing development as a civilizational endeavour rather than solely an economic objective.

Conclusion

The advancement of National Highways under the Viksit Bharat 2047 framework can be examined more effectively through the conceptual vocabulary of Indian political thought. Modern infrastructure development does not represent a break from history; rather, it reflects a resurgence of classical principles that see connectivity, mobility, and spatial integration as fundamental to effective governance. Concepts such as *Artha*, *Dharma* and *Rājadharma*, and ethical statecraft impart a philosophical dimension to highway-led expansion that goes beyond just economic utility. This paper underscores infrastructure as a moral and political instrument for integration, prosperity, and enduring stability by situating highways within an ethical-administrative framework of the state. The amalgamation of traditional political reasoning with contemporary administrative reform demonstrates a distinctive continuity in India's governance tradition. In this perspective, Viksit Bharat 2047 transcends mere policy formulation; it embodies a developmental vision rooted in civilization, wherein infrastructure intertwines intellectual heritage with contemporary realities.

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