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## The Concept of Righteous Leadership: King Pṛthu in the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa\*

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### Abstract

*This paper explores how King Pṛthu, the first anointed king in the Paurāṇic tradition, emerges as a paradigmatic figure of ideal kingship whose leadership is legitimized not merely by birth but by divine sanction and personal merit. Through a textual analysis of Canto Four, the study highlights Pṛthu's multifaceted role-as a protector of the people, a restorer of dharma, a spiritual seeker, and a selfless ruler who prioritizes the well-being of his subjects above personal gain. The major objectives of this study are to identify the defining characteristics of righteous leadership as exemplified by King Pṛthu in the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa; to examine how the text constructs King Pṛthu as an ideal model of dhārmic kingship, integrating spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions; and to explicate the contemporary relevance of King Pṛthu's leadership model in addressing present-day political and ecological challenges. The researcher uses Max Weber's sociological theory of authority for the interpretation of the text. The theorist corroborates how moral legitimacy is constructed in the narrative-not through coercive power or legal structures, but through personal virtue, divine approval, and service to the people. The main conclusion drawn from this investigation is that the story of King Pṛthu in the Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa underscores that righteous leadership is defined by selfless duty, moral integrity, and the welfare of all beings.*

*Keywords:* Divine legitimacy, governance, ideal ruler, righteousness, sacrifice

### Foundations of Righteous Kingship in the *Purāṇic* Tradition: An Introduction

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Leadership rooted in righteousness (*dharma*) has been a central theme in Indian political and spiritual thought since ancient times. The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, one of the most revered texts in the Purāṇic tradition, offers a profound vision of kingship that merges spiritual authority with political responsibility. Among the many rulers featured in the Purāṇa, King Pṛthu stands out as a paradigmatic figure whose reign is marked by justice, humility, and an unwavering commitment to the welfare of his subjects. His story, found primarily in Canto Four, Chapters 15–23, presents not only a divine narrative but also a practical guide to ideal governance. Pṛthu's character, actions, and dialogues reveal a concept of leadership that is deeply moral, theologically grounded, and socially beneficial-making his rule a model for righteous rule.

King Pṛthu is introduced as the son of King Vena, a despotic ruler who was killed by the sages due to his irreligious conduct. The sages then churn Vena's body to bring forth Pṛthu, a *śaktyāveśa avatāra*—an empowered incarnation of Viṣṇu—signifying divine sanction for righteous rule. In this context, sage Maitreya postulates:

The great sages were highly learned in *Vedic* knowledge. When they saw the male and female born of the arms of Vena's body, they were very pleased, for they could understand that the couple was an expansion of a plenary portion of Visnu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead."<sup>1</sup> (4. 15. 2)

The statement highlights the sages' profound understanding of Vedic knowledge, which enabled them to recognize the divine origin of the male and female born from Vena's body as a manifestation of a plenary portion of Viṣṇu, evoking their great satisfaction and affirming the sacred legitimacy of the couple. According to Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, "Pṛthu Mahārāja was a perfect king who ruled over the world not by political strength but by the strength of his devotional service and righteous conduct" (*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (694)). This introduction sets the tone for a vision of leadership that is not merely administrative but spiritual in nature, demanding accountability to both the divine and the people.

A key episode that reveals the essence of Pṛthu's righteous leadership is his interaction with Pṛthivī, the Earth goddess, who initially refuses to yield her resources due to past exploitation. Instead of using brute force, Pṛthu engages her through reason, compassion, and ethical persuasion (4:18.6-20). This encounter highlights Pṛthu's ecological sensitivity and moral restraint—qualities seldom emphasized in traditional kingship models. Scholars such as S.K. Ramachandra Rao observe that Pṛthu's

dialogue with Earth signifies “a shift from exploitative governance to one of responsibility, sustainability, and divine duty” (*Purāṇic Lore and Legend*, 198). Through this, the *Bhāgavata* constructs a model of a ruler who views his kingdom not as property to control but as a sacred trust to protect.

Pr̥thu’s performance of ninety-nine horse sacrifices (*aśvamedha yajñas*) also illustrates his spiritual dedication and political authority. The sacrifices are not acts of vanity but are meant to ensure the prosperity and purification of the kingdom. When Indra tries to sabotage the hundredth sacrifice out of jealousy, Pr̥thu refrains from retaliation and is advised by the sages and Viṣṇu to forgive Indra for the greater good (SB 4.19.20-31). This act of forbearance reveals a deeper principle of righteous leadership: prioritizing peace over personal pride. Dimmitt and Van Buiten in *Classical Hindu Mythology* note that “Pr̥thu’s greatness lies not in military might but in moral maturity and spiritual awareness, which elevates him to a divine level of kingship.” His renunciation of the final sacrifice demonstrates his detachment and humility-core virtues of *dharmic* rule.

Thus, the narrative of King Pr̥thu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* provides a multidimensional framework for understanding righteous leadership. It weaves together themes of divine sanction, ethical governance, ecological consciousness, spiritual wisdom, and public welfare into a coherent model of *dhārmic* rule. In the contemporary context of political instability, corruption, and ecological degradation, Pr̥thu's example remains remarkably relevant. His reign represents a synthesis of authority and humility, of governance and devotion—challenging modern leadership paradigms that often prioritize power over principle. This article explores the concept of righteous leadership through King Pr̥thu’s life and teachings, demonstrating how ancient Indian texts continue to offer enduring insights into the ethics of governance.

### **Problems, Objectives, and Methodology**

While ancient Indian scriptures extensively discuss ideals of kingship and moral governance, there remains a significant gap in scholarly engagement with how these traditional models of leadership can inform contemporary ethical and political discourse. One such underexplored figure is King Pr̥thu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*

*Mahāpurāṇa*, whose rule is portrayed as an embodiment of *rājadharmā*—righteous leadership rooted in divine duty, compassion, ecological responsibility, and spiritual wisdom. Despite the detailed narrative surrounding Pṛthu's reign in Canto Four of the *Purāṇa*, modern research has seldom analyzed the multidimensional aspects of his leadership in relation to present-day concerns about governance, moral authority, and environmental ethics. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is how King Pṛthu's model of leadership, as constructed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, can be systematically interpreted and applied to develop a deeper understanding of ethical leadership paradigms, especially in an era marked by political instability, moral decline, and ecological crisis.

- **What** are the defining characteristics of righteous leadership as exemplified by King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad* ?
- **How** does the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* construct King Pṛthu as an ideal model of *dhārmic* kingship and leadership?
- **Why** is it important to revisit ancient models like King Pṛthu's in the context of today's political and ecological crises?

The major objectives of this study are to identify and describe the defining characteristics of righteous leadership as exemplified by King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*; to examine how the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* constructs King Pṛthu as an ideal model of *dhārmic* kingship, integrating spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions; and to explicate the contemporary relevance of King Pṛthu's leadership model in addressing present-day political and ecological challenges.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in Max Weber's sociological theory of authority, specifically his typology of legitimate domination: charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational authority. Among these, charismatic and traditional authority provides a valuable framework for analyzing King Pṛthu's leadership as depicted in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*. King Pṛthu is described as a *śaktyāveśa avatāra*—an empowered incarnation of Viṣṇu—whose leadership is divinely sanctioned, thus embodying Weber's notion of charismatic authority, where legitimacy arises from perceived divine or extraordinary qualities. At the same time, Pṛthu inherits his royal position from a dynastic lineage, which reflects traditional authority rooted in custom and societal expectations. The textual analysis of

Canto Four (Chapters 15-23) is conducted through a Weberian lens to examine how Pṛthu's rule balances spiritual charisma with established norms of *rājadharmā*.

Weber's theory is further employed to interpret how moral legitimacy is constructed in the narrative-not through coercive power or legal structures, but through personal virtue, divine approval, and service to the people. The analysis focuses on key episodes such as Pṛthu's confrontation with Pṛthivī (Mother Earth), his restraint in dealing with Indra, and his engagement in public welfare and yajñas (sacrifices). These actions are evaluated as expressions of ethical leadership that align with Weber's idea that charismatic authority often leads to social transformation. The methodology combines close reading of the primary text with interpretive analysis to understand how King Pṛthu's leadership exemplifies a sacred model of governance that transcends mere political function, offering a dharmic vision of rule that remains relevant to contemporary discussions on ethical and spiritual leadership.

### Review of Literature

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, one of the most venerated texts in Hindu scriptural tradition, stands as a spiritual, literary, and philosophical monument. With its emphasis on devotion (*bhakti*), divine incarnations, ethical governance, and cosmic vision, the *Bhāgavata* has inspired extensive commentarial and scholarly engagement. Both classical Indian scholars and contemporary academicians have offered interpretations that reflect its religious depth, social relevance, and philosophical complexity. This review aims to synthesize key scholarly perspectives, emphasizing the *Bhāgavata*'s significance in theological discourse, literary heritage, and cultural transformation.

Classical Indian scholars considered the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the pinnacle of Paurāṇic literature, harmonizing *Vedānta* with *Bhakti*. Śrīdhara Svāmī (14th century), in his influential commentary, interprets the *Bhāgavata* as a supreme exposition of devotion (*bhakti-yoga*) where knowledge and renunciation are perfected through love for God. He comments that "*Bhakti* is not subservient to *jñāna* but surpasses it" (*Bhāgavata Tīkā*, Canto 1.1.2). Bhattacharya (1989) affirms that Śrīdhara's commentary became a theological standard for later thinkers such as Vallabha, Caitanya, and Jīva

Gosvāmin (32). This tradition views Kṛṣṇa not merely as a deity but as the supreme reality manifest in personal form, embodying grace and cosmic play (*līlā*).

Modern Indian philosophers and theologians expanded the relevance of the *Bhāgavata* in contemporary discourses. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (1948) notes that the *Purāṇa* emphasizes a “personal and emotional relationship with the Divine,” surpassing the impersonal Brahman of the *Upaniṣads* (260). He argues that this shift from abstract metaphysics to personal devotion marked a revolutionary transformation in Indian spirituality. Swami Prabhupāda, in his multivolume translation and commentary (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, Vol. 1), focuses on the text as a divine blueprint for humanity, stating, “The *Bhāgavata* is the post-graduate study of the Vedic literature” (8). His work brought the *Bhāgavata* to the global stage, aligning its teachings with a devotional lifestyle accessible across cultures.

Western scholars have approached the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* from literary, anthropological, and historical standpoints. Edwin Bryant explicates that the *Bhāgavata* is “the most important theological text of the Kṛṣṇa tradition” (11). He highlights its narrative richness, especially the tenth canto’s portrayal of Kṛṣṇa’s *līlās*, as foundational to *Vaiṣṇava* theology. Barbara Stoler Miller regards the *Bhāgavata* as “a sophisticated poetic and theological synthesis,” identifying its literary devices, episodic structure, and mythic complexity (174). David L. Haberman, in his study of *Rāgānugā Bhakti*, argues that the *Bhāgavata*’s emotional theology provided a dynamic model for ritual performance and devotional psychology (92).

Philosophically, the *Bhāgavata* reconciles dualistic and non-dualistic *Vedāntic* thought. S. N. Dasgupta observes that it offers a “pragmatic synthesis” of metaphysical doctrines, concluding that “Kṛṣṇa is the personal absolute, beyond logic but accessible through devotion” (Vol. II, p. 139). The ethical dimension of the text is articulated through narratives such as that of King Pṛthu, whose rule is based on compassion, duty, and dharma. K. C. Varadachari analyzes this episode as a model of righteous kingship and social responsibility, asserting that “Pṛthu’s kingship reflects divine order translated into worldly administration” (47). The text thus integrates metaphysics with lived ethics, underscoring moral governance rooted in divine consciousness.

Recent feminist and sociocritical readings of the *Bhāgavata* have uncovered its layered treatment of gender, emotion, and social structures. Vasudha Narayanan examines the Gopīs’ devotion as an empowered agency of divine love, asserting that

their longing signifies spiritual liberation rather than romantic subservience (68). Ruth Vanita interprets the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa dynamic as “a queering of theological desire,” where longing transcends social categories and affirms devotional autonomy (112). These readings reveal the *Bhāgavata*’s potential for spiritual egalitarianism, while *Dalit* scholars have pointed to its capacity for subverting caste hierarchies through the universality of *bhakti* (Sharma 91). The aesthetic and performative power of the *Bhāgavata* is evident in Indian art, dance, and literature. A. K. Coomaraswamy discusses how the text influenced classical Indian iconography, particularly depictions of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood and Rāsa Līlā (54). In this context, Sheldon Pollock situates the *Bhāgavata* within the Sanskrit literary tradition, asserting that it “elevated devotional poetry to a high aesthetic and philosophical form” (240). The *Bhāgavata* Mela, Kathak, and Manipuri dance traditions incorporate entire cantos into their performance repertoire, reflecting the text’s integration into live culture and sacred art.

Thus, the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* emerges as a multidimensional text that continues to shape spiritual, philosophical, and cultural discourses across centuries. From Śrīdhara Svāmī’s theological exegesis to feminist and social critiques in modern academia, the *Bhāgavata* has proved itself a dynamic scripture open to ongoing interpretation. Its fusion of metaphysical depth, devotional ecstasy, ethical governance, and literary brilliance enables it to transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. Any scholarly exploration of this text must thus attend to its rich dialogical traditions, contextual layers, and enduring relevance in both sacred and secular domains.

### **King Pṛthu as the Embodiment of Ethical and Divine Governance: A Textual Analysis**

The figure of King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* emerges as a paradigmatic embodiment of ethical and divine governance, harmonizing *dharma* (righteous duty), divine sanction, and social welfare. His kingship is deeply rooted in cosmic order and moral responsibility, reflecting the *Vedic* ideal of a ruler who is both a protector of his people and a devotee of the divine will. Through a close textual analysis of the narrative of Pṛthu Mahārāja, this analysis explores how his governance reflects a model of righteous leadership that transcends temporal authority and becomes a sacred trust. Pṛthu’s interactions with sages, his confrontation with the Earth (*Pṛthivī*), and his public sacrifices reveal a ruler who balances power with humility, justice with



compassion, and action with spiritual insight. This analysis aims to uncover how Pṛthu's reign serves as a theological and philosophical template for understanding the principles of ethical kingship and divine legitimacy within the broader *Purāṇic* tradition.

### **Divine Legitimacy and the Emergence of King Pṛthu**

The narrative of King Pṛthu begins in **Canto IV** of the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* with the downfall of King Vena, a despotic ruler who disrupted the social and cosmic order. In response to his tyranny, the sages invoke a divine solution by churning his body, from which Pṛthu emerges-symbolizing the rebirth of righteous leadership through divine will. With the support of this idea, sage Maitreya examines: "The *brāhmaṇa* and great sages again churned the two arms of king Vena's dead body. As a result a male and female couple came out of his arms"<sup>2</sup> (4:15.1). The churning of King Vena's arms by the *brāhmaṇas* and sages, resulting in the emergence of a male and female couple, symbolizes the transformative power of spiritual authority to regenerate *dharma* by extracting righteousness and divine leadership-embodied in King Pṛthu and Archi-from the remnants of tyranny and disorder. Concerning an argument, G.V. Tagare is apt to state: "Thereupon, a couple was born from the arms of the sonless king when the arms were churned" (515). The birth of a couple from the arms of the sonless King Vena upon their churning signifies a divinely orchestrated regeneration of righteous rule, where strength (arms) gives rise to ideal leadership and consort, restoring balance and *dharma* through sacred intervention. His divine origin distinguishes his authority from mundane political power and introduces a theological foundation for ideal governance.

Maitreya informs Vidura about the policy of King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*:

This King, Mahārāja Pṛthu, is the best amongst those who are following religious principles. As such, he will engage everyone in the pursuit of religious principles and give those principles all protection. He will also be a great chastiser to the irreligious and atheistic<sup>3</sup>. (4:16.4)

It portrays King Pṛthu as the ideal sovereign who exemplifies adherence to *dharma* (religious principles) but also assumes the dual role of protector and enforcer, guiding his subjects toward righteousness while firmly opposing irreligion and atheism.



Elaborating this argument, C. L. Goswami states that King Pṛthu "knows how to honour others" (364). Explaining this statement, one clarifies that this perspective reflects a person's awareness and ability to show respect, appreciation, and dignity toward people, regardless of their status or background. It implies emotional intelligence, humility, and a cultivated sense of ethics in interpersonal relationships.

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* compares King Pṛthu with the sun from his social activities in his kingdom:

This King Pṛthu will be as powerful as the sun-god, and just as the sun-god equally distributes his sunshine to everyone, King Pṛthu will distribute his mercy equally. Similarly, just as the sun-god evaporates water for eight months and, during the rainy season, returns it profusely, this King will also exact taxes from the citizens and return these monies in times of need<sup>4</sup>. (4:16. 6)

The statement uses a simile comparing King Pṛthu to the sun-god to highlight his just and balanced rule, portraying him as a powerful and impartial leader who, like the sun that gives and takes in harmony with nature, will collect taxes responsibly and redistribute them for the welfare of his people during times of need. Based on this idea, Prabhupāda incorporates: "Tax revenues should be distributed to the citizens in time of need, during emergencies such as famine or flood" (721). The notion emphasizes the ethical principle that tax revenues are not merely for state accumulation but should serve the public good, particularly in times of crisis like famine or flood. It underscores the government's duty to act as a steward of public resources, ensuring citizens' welfare through timely and equitable support.

King Pṛthu is portrayed as an exceptionally compassionate ruler, whose boundless mercy and tolerance extend even to those who wrong him, embodying the forbearance of the earth itself. In this context, sage Maitreya inscribes:

King Prithu is very, very kind to all citizens. Even though a poor person may trample over the king's head by violating the rules and regulations, the King, out of his causeless mercy, will be forgetful and forgiving. As a protector of the world, he will be as tolerant as the earth<sup>5</sup>. (4:16.7)

The aforementioned idea highlights King Pṛthu's extraordinary compassion and tolerance, emphasizing that even when wronged by the lowest of his subjects, he

remains forgiving and patient, embodying the selfless endurance of the earth. The extension of this logic can also be found in Ramesh Menon. The critic argues that King Pṛthu was kind to the distressed beings (322). His statement highlights his compassionate nature and portrays him as a benevolent ruler who showed empathy and support toward those in suffering, aligning with the ideals of *dharmic* governance.

King Pṛthu demonstrated his respectful and inclusive leadership by honoring all segments of society—from brāhmaṇas and ministers to citizens and admirers—thereby winning their happiness and loyalty. On this ground, Sage Maitreya argues:

King Prithu thus satisfied and offered all respects to all the leaders of the *brāmans* and other castes, to his servants, to his ministers and to the priests, citizens, general countrymen, people from other communities, admirers and others, and thus they all became happy<sup>6</sup>. (4:17.2)

King Pṛthu emphasized an inclusive and respectful approach to governance, showing that by honoring individuals across all social strata—regardless of caste or status—he fostered unity, satisfaction, and collective happiness among his people. Based on this idea, Swami Ranganathananda debunks: "Pṛthu is the philosopher-king of Indian mythology—who rules by *dharma* and retires to contemplation" (47). The interpreter portrays Pṛthu as the ideal philosopher-king in Indian mythology, whose rule is guided by *dharma* (righteousness) and who ultimately renounces worldly power in favor of spiritual contemplation, embodying the harmony between governance and renunciation.

The inquiry reflects a deeper curiosity about the symbolic acts of King Pṛthu, questioning why the Earth assumed the form of a cow and seeking to understand the spiritual significance behind the milking ritual, including the identity of the calf and the vessel used. Keeping it at the centre of attention, Vidura informs Maitreya in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*:

My dear *brāhmaṇa*, since Mother Earth can appear in different shapes, why did she take the shape of a cow? And when King Prithu milked her, who became the calf, and what was the milking pot?<sup>7</sup> (4:17.3)

The above notion reflects a philosophical and symbolic inquiry, highlighting the allegorical nature of Mother Earth's transformation into a cow and seeking deeper understanding of the roles and elements involved in King Pṛthu's act of 'milking' her to benefit the world. Keeping it at the center of attention, Ranchor Prime appraises that

King Pṛthu milked the earth which is in the form of a cow (24). This activity of King Pṛthu symbolizes his ability to draw forth the Earth's resources through righteous governance and responsibility. It reflects the mythological narrative in which the Earth, personified as a cow, yields her bounty only to a just and virtuous ruler, emphasizing Pṛthu's role as a sustainer and nurturer of his people.

The narrative of King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* serves as a profound illustration of divine legitimacy in kingship, where authority is not merely inherited or seized, but divinely sanctioned and morally upheld. Emerging from the churning of King Vena's body by sages, Pṛthu is portrayed as a divinely ordained ruler whose reign restores cosmic and social order. His governance is marked by righteousness (*dharma*), compassion, and a deep sense of duty towards both the people and the Earth. The allegory of the Earth yielding her riches to Pṛthu underscores his ethical stewardship and the reciprocal relationship between a just ruler and the natural world. Ultimately, Pṛthu's emergence reaffirms the ideal that true sovereignty arises from moral integrity and divine will, reinforcing the *Purāṇic* vision of kingship as a sacred and *dhārmic* responsibility.

### **Governance as Dharma: Pṛthu's Role in Ethical and Social Order**

The concept of governance in the *paurāṇic* thought is deeply intertwined with *dharma*, or righteous duty, where rulers are expected to uphold ethical and moral principles in the service of society. In the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, King Pṛthu emerges as an exemplary figure who embodies this ideal through his just and compassionate rule. His governance is portrayed as a sacred obligation to maintain social harmony, ensure the welfare of all beings, and protect the Earth. By engaging all sections of society-regardless of caste or status-and by restoring the balance between human needs and natural resources, Pṛthu exemplifies a *dhārmic* model of leadership. This study explores how Pṛthu's rule establishes a vision of ethical governance that remains relevant to discussions on leadership, justice, and sustainability even in contemporary contexts.

The description portrays King Pṛthu as an enigmatic and divinely empowered ruler whose confidential strategies, hidden wealth, and boundless virtues place him

beyond ordinary comprehension, much like the ocean deity Varuṇa concealed by the surrounding waters. With the support of this idea, sage Maireya explicates:

No one will be able to understand the policies the King will follow. His activities will also be very confidential, and it will not be possible for anyone to know how he will make every activity successful. His treasury will always remain unknown to everyone. He will be the reservoir of unlimited glories and good qualities, and his position will be maintained and covered just as Varuṇa, the deity of the sea, is covered all around by water<sup>8</sup>. (4:16.10)

The aforementioned statement highlights King Pṛthu's mysterious and divinely guided governance, emphasizing the secrecy of his policies, the hidden nature of his success and wealth, and his profound virtues, likening his concealed yet powerful presence to the god Varuṇa, who remains veiled by the ocean. Keeping the same article in mind, Max Weber intensifies:

Politics is made with the head, not with other parts of the body or soul. And yet devotion to politics, if it is not to be frivolous intellectual play but rather genuinely human conduct, can be born and nourished from passion alone. (151)

This statement underscores the paradox that while politics demands rational, intellectual decision-making ("made with the head"), its meaningful and sincere practice must be fueled by deep personal passion, highlighting the essential balance between reason and emotional commitment in political life.

As an ideal ruler upholding the principles of justice and righteousness, the King will remain firmly rooted in piety, displaying impartiality even between his own son and the son of his enemy. The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* discusses King Pṛthu as an ideal and ethical ruler as follows:

Since the King will always remain on the path of piety, he will be neutral to both his son and the son of his enemy. If the son of his enemy is not punishable, he will not punish him, but if his own son is punishable, he will immediately punish him<sup>9</sup>. (4: 16.13)

The above statement highlights the King's unwavering commitment to justice and moral integrity, demonstrating his impartiality by prioritizing righteousness over personal attachment or bias. To strengthen the argument, Jay Mazo states: "If the son of

his enemy is not punishable, he will not punish him, but if his own son is punishable, he will immediately punish him" (169). This highlights the King's unwavering commitment to impartial justice, placing righteousness above personal ties.

Upon hearing the auspicious and pleasing words of the planet Earth, the King graciously accepted them and, in a symbolic act of providence, transformed Svāyambhuva Manu into a calf to draw forth all herbs and grains from the Earth-personified as a cow-gathering the nourishment into his cupped hands.

After hearing the auspicious and pleasing words of the planet earth, the King accepted them. He then transformed Svāyambhuva Manu into a calf and milked all the herbs and grains from the earth in the form of a cow, keeping them in his cupped hands<sup>10</sup>. (4:18.12)

The aforementioned idea symbolically portrays King Pṛthu's divine authority and nurturing role, illustrating how, through wisdom and righteous action, he drew forth the earth's bounty-represented as milking a cow to ensure the sustenance and prosperity of his people. With this conditioning, Prabhupāda further debunks: "All creatures within the earth fulfill the necessities required for human beings" (792). It suggests that all living beings on earth play a vital role in sustaining human life by contributing directly or indirectly to the fulfillment of essential human needs, reflecting the interdependence between humanity and the natural world.

The elevation of King Pṛthu to sovereign status by revered sages and *brāhmaṇas*, accompanied by divine blessings and gifts from the demigods, marks a significant moment in his reign, wherein empowered by Lord Viṣṇu, he profoundly enhanced and cultivated the earth. Vidura confirms the activities of King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*:

My dear *brāhmaṇa* Maitreya, it is very enlightening to understand that King Pṛthu was enrolled by the great sages and *brāhmaṇas*. All the demigods presented him with innumerable gifts, and he also expanded his influence by personally receiving strength from Lord Viṣṇu. Thus he greatly developed the earth<sup>11</sup>. (4:21.9)

The statement highlights that King Pṛthu's authority was divinely sanctioned and supported by sages, *brāhmaṇas*, and demigods, and through the power bestowed by

Lord Viṣṇu, he expanded his influence and significantly advanced the development of the earth. Basing his argument on such idea, C. L. Goswami appraises that King Pṛthu received different gifts from the gods (382). This notion indicates that King Pṛthu was favored by the gods, who acknowledged his divine authority and role by bestowing upon him various gifts, symbolizing their support and the sanctity of his kingship.

King Pṛthu embodied the highest standards of personal virtue and spiritual excellence, mirroring the wisdom of Bṛhaspati, the self-mastery of the Supreme Lord, and the humility and devotion of a true servant to the cows, *brāhmaṇas*, and spiritual teachers. In this context, Maitreya is apt to state:

In his personal behavior, Pṛthu Mahārāja exhibited all virtuous conduct, profound spiritual knowledge he was exactly like Bṛhaspati. In self-control he was like the Supreme Personality of Godhead Himself. As far as his devotional service was concerned, he was a great follower of devotees who were attached to cow protection and rendering of all service to the spiritual master and the *brāhmaṇas*. He was perfect in his shyness and in his gentle behavior, and when he engaged in some philanthropic activity, he worked as if he were working for his own personal self<sup>12</sup>. (4:22.62)

Thus, King Pṛthu exemplified the ideal ruler, whose virtuous conduct, profound spiritual wisdom, unwavering devotion, and selfless service reflected a life fully aligned with *dharma* and divine purpose. Concerning such an argument, Edwin Bryant argues that King Pṛthu is an ideal ruler of the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* (21). Thus, King Pṛthu is portrayed as an ideal ruler in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* because he embodies righteous governance, impartial justice.

King Pṛthu's governance exemplifies the integration of *dharma* with political leadership, where ethical conduct, justice, and spiritual responsibility form the foundation of social order. His impartiality, humility, devotion to the *brāhmaṇas* and the Supreme, and concern for the well-being of all living beings reflect a model of ruler ship rooted in higher moral principles rather than mere power or ambition. By aligning his authority with the cosmic order (*ṛta*), Pṛthu not only maintains peace and prosperity but also uplifts the spiritual consciousness of his kingdom. Thus, his reign stands as a timeless paradigm of righteous leadership where governance itself becomes a sacred duty in service to both the people and the divine.

## Conclusion

King Pṛthu in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* encapsulates an enduring vision of ideal kingship grounded in *dharma* (righteousness), cosmic order, and divine sanction. King Pṛthu's leadership is portrayed as a confluence of moral integrity, administrative wisdom, spiritual consciousness, and unwavering commitment to the welfare of his subjects. Unlike autocratic or hereditary rulers, Pṛthu earns his legitimacy through action—subduing the Earth to yield resources, ensuring equitable distribution, protecting the weak, and upholding truth. His governance is not merely about statecraft but about *yajña* (sacrificial service), where the king becomes a servant of the people and an instrument of divine will. The Bhagavata Purāṇa presents Pṛthu as an archetype whose rule aligns with the will of the Supreme Being, illustrating how sovereignty must be guided by higher ethical and spiritual values. He embodies the ideal of the philosopher-king, harmonizing temporal duties with transcendental wisdom. His reign signifies that righteous leadership involves a dynamic balance between power and humility, justice and compassion, duty and devotion. This concept challenges modern political paradigms by proposing a leadership model that is not self-serving but sacrificial, not authoritative but accountable, and not secular but spiritually inspired. Thus, the figure of King Pṛthu stands as a timeless exemplar, offering profound insights into ethical governance that remains relevant for contemporary discourses on leadership, state responsibility, and the spiritual dimensions of political authority.

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### Appendix

1. तददृष्ट्वा मिथुनं जातं ऋषयो ब्रह्मवादिनः ।  
ऊचुः परमसन्तुष्टा विदित्वा भगवत्कलाम् ॥ (4:15.2)
2. अथ तस्य पुनर्विप्रैरपुत्रस्य महीपतेः ।  
बाहुभ्यां मथ्यमानाभ्यां मिथुनं समपद्यत ॥ (4:15.1)
3. एष धर्मभृतां श्रेष्ठो लोकं धर्मेऽनुवर्तयन् ।  
गोप्ता च धर्मसेतूनां शास्ता तत्परिपन्थिनाम् ॥ (4:16.4)
4. वसु काल उपादत्ते काले चायं विमुञ्चति ।  
समः सर्वेषु भूतेषु प्रतपन् सूर्यवद्विभुः प्रतपन् सूर्यवद्विभुः ॥ (4:16.6)
5. तितिक्षत्यक्रमं वैन्य उपर्याक्रमतामपि ।  
भूतानां करुणः शश्वदार्तानां क्षितिवृत्तिमान् ॥ (4:16.7)
6. ब्राह्मणप्रमुखान् वर्णान् ब्राह्मणप्रमुखान् वर्णान् भृत्यामात्यपुरोधसः ।  
पौरान् जानपदान् पौरान् श्रेणीः जानपदान् श्रेणीः प्रकृतीः समपूजयत् ॥ (4:17.2)
7. कस्माद्धार गोरूपं धरित्री बहुरूपिणी ।  
यां दुदोह पृथुस्तत्र को वत्सो दोहनं च किम् ॥ (4:17.3)
8. अव्यक्तवर्त्मैष निगूढकार्यो गम्भीरवेधा उपगुप्तवित्तः ।  
अनन्तमाहात्म्यगुणैकधामा पृथुः प्रचेता इव संवृतात्मा ॥ (4:16.10)
9. नादण्ड्यं दण्डयत्येष सुतमात्मद्विषामपि ।  
दण्डयत्यात्मजमपि दण्ड्यं धर्मपथे स्थितः ॥ (4:16.13)
10. इति प्रियं हितं वाक्यं भुव आदाय भूपतिः ।  
वत्सं कृत्वा मनुं पाणावदुहत्सकलौषधीः ॥ (4:18.12)
11. सोऽभिषिक्तः पृथुर्विप्रैर्लब्धाशेषसुरार्हणः ।  
बिभ्रत्स वैष्णवं तेजो बाह्वोर्याभ्यां दुदोह गाम् ॥ (4:21.9)
12. बृहस्पतिर्ब्रह्मवादे आत्मवत्त्वे स्वयं हरिः ।  
भक्त्या गोगुरुविप्रेषु विष्वक्सेनानुवर्तिषु ।  
ह्रिया प्रश्रयशीलाभ्यामात्मतुल्यः परोद्यमे ॥ (4:22.62)