

**Dharma a Moral Code or a Force of Dominance: an Exploratory Study  
on Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni***

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**Abstract:**

Since ancient times in India particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism, dharma has been propagated as a moral code which is carrying forward through various means like myth, art, culture and painting etc., and is believed to be a noble truth which is to be followed in life but sometimes dharma appears as a wicked force of dehumanization rather than a guiding force of morality if practiced and handled inappropriately. This paper intends to counter the question of dharma, whether is a moral code or a dominating force and aspire to demonstrate the role of dharma in the life of Draupadi in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*. It tries to examine how the concept of dharma appears in disguise as a tool of patriarchal dominance and an exploitative force in the life of Draupadi. The prior objective of this study is to reflect the affliction of a devoted wife following dharma that brings forth the reality of dharma in her life as an idea of dominance which leads directly towards suffering, inequality, injustice, and marginalization. The inspiration for this paper comes from Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* where the female characters seems to revolt against all patriarchal ideologies that are making them devoid of their rights. This study tries to represent the inevitable dharma which is enforced on the psyche of a venerable woman as obligation and is referred as the only truth. And the major motive behind this paper is to probe the psychological destruction of Draupadi while following dharma.

**Keywords:** Dharma, Construct, Exploitation, Obligation, Probe, Veracity

**Introduction:**

This section of the paper highlights and exhibit what dharma means according to various conceptions of Indian philosophical, religious as well as spiritual beliefs. The focus of this study is to explore how dharma which is a fine, noble philosophy if used indelicately can turn one's life into a complete distortion. 'Dharma' is a Sanskrit word which comes from the root 'dhar' means 'to uphold', 'to support', and 'to sustain'. Dharma sometimes implies to 'Hindu Dharma' which is designated as religious as well as spiritual doctrines of philosophical thoughts. 'Dharma' in particular has no specific definition but has various denotations and connotations. Monier William's *Sanskrit- English Dictionary* defines the term 'dharma' as prescribed conduct, duty, right, justice, virtue morality, religion, good work according to right or rule. Lord Krishna . . . in the ninth chapter . . . declares that spiritual knowledge of Himself is dharmya, or conducive, to and consistent with dharma:

. . . This knowledge is the king of sciences, the king of secrets, and the supreme purifier. Understood by direct perception, it is conducive to dharma, very easy to perform, and everlasting. People who do not place their faith in this dharm, O burner of the foe, do not attain Me but return to the path of death and material existence (BG. 9.1-3). (Goswami)

According to holistic view of Hinduism 'dharma' is a noble philosophical doctrine to be followed to live a happier, noble and lawful life. It is a philosophy that makes one dutiful towards his/her job so that one can become a responsible citizen. But this paper is not focused on the righteousness of this notion but on its ill effects if treated erroneously. This paper attempts to argue that no religious, philosophical thought meant for people's welfare is an absolute truth. Dharma in simple words is one's gratitude towards each and every component of life and

understanding the value of life without degrading, marginalizing or dominating others. In modern society still there are numerous impositions in domestic life especially in India led by patriarchal institution. India is a country rich in spiritual, religious belief and is highly influenced with the concept of dharma. But in modern society in India it is found in all religions. In Hindu society the head of the family is absolute authority in making decisions for everyone particularly in deciding the mates for their son or daughter and so is the case in Islamic community which is also evident in the movie *Bol* and *Secret Superstar* where the head (male) of the family do not allow their girls to live their dreams. If we talk about Christianity, *The English Standard Version Bible* says,

This at last is bone of my bones

And flesh of my flesh

She shall be called woman

Because she was taken out of Man (Wheaton)

The use of 'dharma' as a dominating force is visible in case of ' Draupadi' in Yajnaseni. Yajnaseni has been tortured excessively due to which she often finds herself into neurosis. She is detained to live the life according to her wishes. She is highly imposed with patriarchal thoughts of dharma. She is being enforced about what she ought to do and what is the purpose of her life. She has been even told that her life is meant to bear suffering and it is her blessings to bear suffering in order to become a great Sati, 'her sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another (Y 46)'.

## **Literature Review**

This section of the paper highlights the books and articles written that defines dharma and its fruitfulness. Writers interpret dharma according to their own understanding of religious belief or

cultural historical background of this philosophical doctrine. In chapter one ‘What is Hindu Dharma’ from the book *Hindu Dharma* Bansi Sharma explains that,

Dharma did not originate from a single person, a single book, or at a single point in time. The foundations of this oldest surviving religion were laid by ancient *rishis* (sages), who taught their disciples the eternal principles of life they had discovered through their meditations. The *rishis* did not claim authorship of these spiritual principles. Although some names are mentioned in scriptures, nobody knows exactly who these people (4)

S. Radhakrishnan in his book defines dharma as, ‘. . . a code of conduct supported by the general conscience of the people . . . Dharma does not force men into a fixed code of mechanical rules, but a living spirit which grows and moves in response to the development of society (47)’

Charles Drekmeier in his book, *Kingship and Community in Early India* says that, ‘. . . All things have dharma – the principle of being and their harmony with truth. It is the eternal and necessary moral law, the code of righteousness; the term is used to denote both truth and righteous conduct (8)’.

Devdutt Patnaik has given a very practical definition to dharma by relating it to the lives of human being by saying that it is their task to practice dharma as they are self sufficient, as he says that, ‘Humans alone are capable of creating a code of conduct based on empathy and directed at discovering the meaning of life. This is dharma. To live dharma is to live without fear (237)’

John Koller writes in his article *Dharma: An Experiment of Universal Order* that, ‘dharma is the aim of living in accord with all the various rules that apply to a person in a particular class,



Dharma is imposed on Draupadi in order to save earth as if she possess some heavenly powers and is not human like. She is being manipulated since the time of her birth to obey dharma of life as an absolute truth which is imposed by her brother and father together time to time. 'Dharma' has spiritual connotations which are evident in the novel when she is offered to Krishna as an object like flowers. So in dilemma she herself thinks,

So I was an offering to Krishna. If that were not so, why would Sage Upyaj have christened me "Krishna" (9)

Dhrishtadyumna in Swayamvar introduces his sister as, '. . . the central tenant of her existence is the establishment of truth and the protection of dharma . . . (40)'. We can clearly see the dominance that her brother is tries to impose on her with specific tasks which this study aims to explore and condemn. In an instance Yajnaseni retaliates against the replacement of her emotions and devotion of Krishna towards Arjuna. But her brother used dharma as a weapon to suppress her questioning attitude. He says,

Not for Arjun but for the preservation of dharma has your birth taken place. It is to dharma that you are offered. The father's dharma is the daughter's dharma . . ."

(46)

Situations for Draupadi become even worse and deteriorating when she is won by Arjun is Swayamar and is brought to introduce to the mother Kunti. Yudhisthir says, 'Mother, today we have brought a priceless thing. Open the door and see! . . . (55)' She replied from inside to distribute among all. she is stunned when each of Pandavas are obeying the words of Kunti as absolute saying and are ready to distribute Drapaudi equally among them as is she is an article or a person devoid of emotions and feelings. Arjuna himself inflicted with dharma says, "Destroying dharma, violating commands of my mother and ilder brother, the happiness that will

accure to me will not really be happiness. This will not bring pure contentment to my mind. Therefore we shall all enjoy the princess equally. She will be the wife, according to dharma, of us all (57)'. While Yudhisthir imposed dharma by referencing Puranas, 'Jatila too had married seven husbands for preserving dharma (70)'.

Later in the novel, Yajnaseni realises that everything which is imposed on her is merely an idea of dominance in the name of dharma. Therefore she says,

All the rituals and rules have been created in society built around the distinction between rich-poor, high-low, brahmin- chandal, male-female, and such others, the profound inequalities that had been set up based upon considerations of virtue and sin against all of these a lifelong war would have to be waged (92-93)

Yajnaseni is also highly influenced with Paativratyam dharma and becomes a devoted wife and is volunteer to do anything for Arjun (Phalguni) in the name of dharma. She says,

. . . I am yours. Do what you will with me. Now I shall act according to your wishes. In treading the path chosen by you, I will care about virtue and sin. Win my soul, overcome it. Oh Phalguni! It is you who are dearest to me . . . (196)

This paper solely represent the construction of dharma as the interest of the dominating force which is still persisting in modern world and is proving a disastrous weapon in the hands of patriarchy and setting up standards of living for woman like what to wear? Whom to choose as partner? To whom she would marry? It is evident in the novel with Karna's thought,

The greatest offense a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus! If she had groveled at out feet and begged, perhaps she might have escaped such a gross insult, just a

knowledge and power enhance a man's attraction similarly ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman . . . (238)

The subordinate acceptance sometimes is visible in the character of Yajnaseni. But she also explores the way to overcome the patriarchal dominance. She after following the Paativratyam dharma comes to a conclusion i.e.

Tolerance is the ornament of woman. But to her injustice with bowed head is not the dharma of woman. If the husband adopts the wrong path and the wife remains quiet, then everyone will suffer. The portion of sin in the world will increase. Innocent people will suffer . . . (251)

Dharma all the time is imposed on Yajnaseni whenever she is in situation of rebel, arguments and reasonable questioning. A self- sacrificing woman and mother is full of readiness to offer parental love to all. So Yudhishtir says,

Yajnaseni! Make your heart generous, vast. Consider all children of this world yours . . . Let flow a flood of maternal love for the innumerable people of the world who are miserable, suffering, fallen . . . (270)

The prior aim of this paper is to demonstrate that dharma is undoubtedly a remarkable philosophical doctrine of noble, peaceful and prosperous life but the introspection of the misinterpretation of dharma in the disguise of moral code, which in the case of Yajnaseni appears a force of dominance. There are some other objectives of this study that it tries to accomplish. It attempts to demonstrate that mythological, religious doctrine cannot be necessarily an absolute truth and imposition in the name of dharma is heinous if handled wrongly.

This paper also has some limitations of its own as it is merely an exploratory study of dharma as a force of dominance and is not concerned with modern imposition of dharma in different forms which is mentioned in brief, later in this study. So far as the future perspectives are concerned, this study suggests possibilities of research in the field of philosophical ideas as a force. A striking question pops up here which is yet to be studied and can be explored such as, Is it fair to consider all religious prescriptions as absolute as Draupadi followed in *Yajnaseni*? This study is going to be highly significant in future especially in introspecting laws/ religious doctrines that are unfit for the welfare of humanity and the state. The problem of this paper is very essential to address as it has never been addressed before and is now in different forms in modern times such as brain hacking and mental fitness which is now included in the field of marketing which is yet to be explored and studied with the help of sample, survey and field studies. The study aims to emphasise that the concept of dharma and its viability in present time must be addressed in order to understand the relevance of such policies, laws in the name of religion or dharma. This study is highly significant as it builds a critical thought to critically analyse religious, spiritual prescription in the name of dharma which if propagated and imposed wrongly can turn into a disastrous philosophical doctrines.

After studying the problem of this paper certain findings are drawn from the above discussion. It is explored that Draupadi suffers merely because of following dharma blindly in the form of psychic imposition that surpasses her conscious in all the situations. So it can be asserted surely that any religious, spiritual, social or philosophical doctrines of wellbeing can not necessarily be an absolute idea for all the ages. Moreover Draupadi suffers in *Yajnaseni* more with submissive nature and accepting dharma all the time in her life. It is also drawn from the

above discussion that individual freedom, free thinking and rational approach should not be repressed as Draupadi has done but instead allowed to emerge to nip the evil in the bud.

### **Conclusion**

‘Dharma’ is indeed a moral guiding force, a law that transforms one’s persona to a faithful, honest and responsible life through which a person can contribute to the humanity and to the whole ecosystem. Dharma can be replaced synonymously by laws of the modern democratic world which a citizen is bound to follow. But it is evident that to repeal the irrelevant laws to the present scenario there are provisions of new amendments in the constitutions of democratic nations. Similarly this paper intends to emphasise that people should not take each religious doctrine as absolute truth before analyzing its applicability in their lives and in modern world too. Liberty of the self, free will of thinking and inner self of Draupadi in Yajnaseni is crushed and she has been completely devastated while saving dharma for the sake of others and avoiding the identity of her own. The focus of this study is therefore to introspect the recent development in this field of research if the dominating forces in different forms in modern technological world are emerging. This study explores how Draupadi for the sake of imposed dharma had obeyed all the commands of her husbands, brother, father and elders but in return she has received merely sufferings. Therefore this paper aims to assert that human beings belonging to different religions must think and then apply religious doctrines, laws in their life to introspect how fruitful they are to themselves or merely an imposition as is evident in the life of Draupadi.

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