

Exploring Power and Agency within Global south from the standpoint of Dharma: An International perspective

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Abstract

The research contends that the resurgence of the Global South is not merely a redistribution of material power but also a contestation of dominant epistemologies and normative orders. By foregrounding Dharma as a civilizational framework, the study demonstrates how indigenous philosophies can enrich debates on international ethics, global governance, and the evolving world order. It further argues that incorporating Dharmic principles into International Relations scholarship contributes to the decolonization of the discipline by broadening its theoretical foundations beyond Western-centric assumptions.

Ultimately, this study advances a normative and interdisciplinary framework for understanding power and agency in the Global South. It highlights the relevance of Dharmic thought in fostering a more equitable, pluralistic, and ethically grounded international order while contributing to emerging debates on non-Western International Relations, strategic culture, and global justice.

Keywords: Global South, Dharma, International Relations, Power, Agency, Indian Philosophy, Strategic Culture, Global Governance, Civilizational Perspectives, South-South Cooperation, Non-Western IR, Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Dharma, as a philosophical and religious concept from ancient Indian traditions, encompasses various principles and practices that guide individuals towards enlightenment and liberation. While Dharma is often associated with individual spiritual growth and moral principles, it has also influenced the dynamics of power and agency in the global south especially from Indian subcontinent. The framework of Dharma and relational ontology challenges the secular worldview in International Relations (IR) by investigating the relational cosmology of Dharma. We posit that IR is rooted in secularized Judeo-Christian presumptions about time, interpersonal relationships, societal structure, and the sovereign state, which establish cognitive boundaries for the discipline. Through an examination of ancient Indian classical texts such as The Mahabharata, Gita, and Ramayana, we propose to provincialize these assumptions by engaging with the concept of Dharma. Our argument asserts that Dharma provides a lens for comprehending the multifaceted nature of human existence without dismissing its diverse and conflicting manifestations. By deconstructing the concepts of self and other, Dharma illustrates how all beings are interconnected in a moral, social, and cosmic order based on human agency. In an international perspective, the global south refers to countries and regions that are economically and socially marginalized compared to the more developed nations of the global north. Power dynamics in the global south are often characterized by uneven distribution, where certain groups or individuals hold significant influence and control over resources, decision-making processes, and institutions. This can manifest in the form of economic inequality, political dominance by a few elites, and social hierarchies based on factors such as class, caste or ethnicity. Agency, on the other hand, refers to the capacity of individuals and communities to exercise their own will, make choices, and take actions that shape their lives and societies.

Objectives

With the purpose of providing a concise overview of the most recent development in international order. The purpose of the study is to bringing ancient Indian thoughts in contemporary IR.

Literature Review

Within the framework of Dharma, the exploration of power dynamics and agency in the global south can take various dimensions. Some key considerations include:

1.. Social Justice: Dharma emphasizes the principles of compassion, fairness, and justice. From an international perspective, this could involve examining how power is distributed in society and identifying ways to address inequality and empower marginalized communities. This may include advocating for economic reforms, promoting inclusive political participation, and challenging discriminatory social practices.

1. *Environmental Ethics*: Dharma also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the responsible stewardship of the Earth. This can provide a lens to Analyse the power dynamics between global south countries and global north countries in terms of resource extraction, climate change impacts, and sustainable development.

2. *Cultural Empowerment*: Dharma recognizes the value of diverse cultural traditions and the need for cultural preservation and empowerment. In the global south, cultural agency can be examined in terms of preserving indigenous knowledge, promoting cultural expression, and challenging cultural hegemony imposed by global north influences.

3. *Education and Awareness*: Dharma emphasizes the importance of knowledge and self-reflection. In the global south, empowering individuals and communities with education and awareness about their rights, history, and socio-political dynamics can enable them to challenge oppressive power structures and assert their agency. Overall, exploring the dynamics of power and agency in the global south within the framework of Dharma requires a multidimensional approach that integrates social, economic, political, and cultural perspectives. It involves understanding historical contexts, addressing structural inequalities, promoting social justice, and empowerment.

The ancient Indian cosmology of dharma, which provides an alternative episteme of moral, social, and cosmic order. Dharma is not derived from any revelation of God or sacred scriptures but from the conditions of life in all its inherent diversity. It sustains life and holds together the unified existence of all sentient beings and the universe in a cosmic order that does not have a beginning nor an end. We briefly explain the etymology and varied iterations of dharma as it evolved through the centuries before homing on its conceptualization in The Mahabharata – an epic, which offers a textual reading of the dharmic tradition. The article recognizes the limits of dharma, especially those ensuing from its iteration of varna-ashrama dharma outlined in the Dharma shastras that produced societal inequalities, legitimized through rituals of purity and pollution, which were later codified by colonial law into the category of ‘caste’. Whereas caste is a characteristic of a particular instantiation of dharma as found in a hegemonic ‘Brahmanical’ reading of Hinduism, it is not intrinsic to the dharmic cosmology articulated in The Mahabharata, per se. We wish, instead, India as a form of social exclusion: as Nicholas B. Dirks notes, ‘caste is a modern phenomenon the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule’. Neither do we specifically focus on how dharmic traditions engage with other non-dharmic traditions while acknowledging the ‘epistemic privilege’⁶ that a particular instantiation of dharma enjoys within modern India (Behera, 2021).

Dharma offers very different ways of understanding the conditions of human existence. Following Chaturvedi Badrinath, three main characteristics may be discerned. First, there are no prior suppositions concerning the human condition. Even the ideas of atman (soul) and karma (action), that are generally taken to be the most fundamental concepts of the Indian philosophical systems are ‘products of a certain method of inquiry and were not presupposed in that method itself’. According to Badrinath, the concept of karma is derived from a ‘systematic analysis of the structure of human personality’, in that ‘every act, including thought, for thought is also an act, leaves its corresponding trace in oneself and in those to whom that act is directed. The particularly Integrating an Indian perspective: Hindu nationalist visions of Integrating International Relations y of psychological traces constitutes the particularity of one’s individuality. Second, human life, by its very nature, is composed of opposites and neither one of them can be denied, or suppressed, without inviting ‘untruth’ or disorder, first within the individual, and then in society. Dharma acknowledges contradictory needs and desires as part of human nature, which explains its incoherence. But it then shows that there is an appropriate time for fulfilling the entire range of these desires and, to do so in a manner that these are ‘naturally’ reconciled (Behera, 2021).

Integrating an Indian perspective: Hindu nationalist visions of Integrating International Relations:

1. Kautilya’s Artha Shastra and the Mahabharata’s Bhagavad Gita have been chosen for examination as they are often referred to both in Western and Indian analyses of Indian strategic and political culture, war and ethics. For example, beginning in October 2012 the prestigious New Delhi-based think tank, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), began conducting research and hosting events based around ‘Indian Indigenous Historical Knowledge’. The events focused first on Kautilya’s Artha Shastra and then expanded to include the

Mahabharata. The Institute's focus on these texts underscores their significance to Indians; they provide depth and scope to our understanding of what an IR that incorporates non-Western ideas might look like, especially when compared with the perspective of today's dominant IR theories. In addition, these texts are referred to by Hindutva thinkers – Kautilya is useful for Hindutva proponents to point to for evidence of early economic and political prowess in (Hindu) India – and form part of textual backdrop of the ideology (although they are used equally as comprehensively by non-Hindutva thinkers).

2. One such emerging Indian thinker is the Jayashree Vivekanandan, whose Interrogating International Relations challenges the bias of IR theory towards Westphalian systems of power and its consequently ineffectual treatment of post-colonial societies, such as India, which do not fit the ideal European nation-state mould. Vivekanandan begins from the premise that strategic history in general is understudied and undertheorized, while Indian strategic history suffers from a pervasive, lingering misrepresentation born of Orientalist and colonial thinking; essentially, as commented upon above, the mistaken idea that there is no strategic thinking. In addition to this, Vivekanandan contests the assertion that independence marked the commencement of India's diplomatic history and seeks to correct the reluctance of IR to examine pre-modern history by choosing the Mughal era, namely the rule of Emperor Akbar from 1556 to 1605. 3. The Mahabharata's Bhagavad Gita the Bhagavad Gita is a 700-verse scripture which is part of one of the largest and most complex of the Hindu epics, the Mahabharata. Swarna Rajagopalan quite rightly notes in his wonderful chapter on its place in Indian strategic thought, that the Mahabharata 'is not merely a single text but an entire tradition in itself'.³³ Sitting within this great work, the Gita (as it is commonly referred to) features a conversation between the deity and young prince Krishna, and the protagonist and warrior prince Arjuna, as they sit on the brink of the epic battle of Kurukshetra. It can be read both as a work of literature or poetry and from the perspective of Oriental studies, area studies, philosophy or theology. The Gita is an important religious text for Hindus. However, as Wendy Doniger reminds us, this was not always the case because strictly speaking: 'There is no Hindu canon. The books that Euro-Americans privileged (such as the Bhagavad Gita) were not always so highly regarded by "all Hindus", certainly not before the Euro Americans began to praise them'. Vivekanandan concurs, outlining how texts became traditions through the hunt for the pure essence of Indian culture that led the colonialists to look beyond the narrative, at certain classical texts of ancient India (Layton et.al, 2016). 4. The Gita demonstrates the nuances in the Sanskrit conception of war, and just war. In a way that echoes the manipulation of the Bible or Qur'an, this allows for religion to be used as a justification for violent acts. However, the political and strategic culture of Hinduism differs to that of Judeo-Christianity because its ontological premises are quite distinct. To begin with, the notion of kingship in Hinduism - and therefore the notion of the rights and duties of those in power - diverges from what is seen in Judeo-Christian tradition. In Hindu tradition the king is seen as an extension of God rather than as being appointed by God. As the Laws of Manu explain: For when this world was without a king and people ran about in all directions out of fear, the Lord emitted a king in order to guard his entire (realm), taking lasting elements from Indra, the Wind, Yama, the Sun, Fire, Varuna, the Moon and (Kubera) the Lord of Wealth. Because a king is made from particles of these lords of the gods, therefore he surpasses all living beings in brilliant energy, and, like the Sun, he burns eyes and hearts, and no one on earth is able even to look at him This impacted on the ethics of the king's actions because it placed his actions within the larger scheme of dharma (righteousness), or more specifically within raja dharma (the duties of the king). An expression of these duties and their religio-ethical dimension can be seen if we compare them to the concept of just war (Layton et.al, 2016).

POWER AND AGENCIES FROM BUDHISHTH PERSPECTIVE OF

DHARMA: Buddhist and Critical theories exhibit greater ambition than mainstream International Relations (IR). The Buddhist perspective offers a genuine alternative to Western models of IR, not merely because it originated in Asia but due to its foundation on distinctive philosophical principles. This perspective introduces the concept of "radical interdependence," challenging Western understandings of reality and interdependence. Buddhism's unique ontology posits that we are not isolated, independent entities; realizing this truth leads to a natural disposition of equanimity and altruism rather than selfishness. Together, these

Buddhist philosophical claims provide a different starting point for contemplating ourselves and the interconnected world we inhabit, characterized by profound interdependence.

CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

Zhao Tingyang's application of the concept Tianxing (all-under-heaven) as the basis for an idealistic world order that is fair, impartial to all, harmonious, and cooperative. Zhao contrasts this "world-building" project to the state-building and conflictual relations associated with Westphalian IR (Zhao 2006, 2018). Some have critiqued this literature as parochial and nationalistic (Callahan 2008), that is, too Chinese, others as "derivative," that is, too Western influenced (Shih and Yu 2015). Buddhist ideas are curiously absent from this literature, but as will be seen in the next chapter, Buddhist theory parallels Qin's writings and others as it is also based on a relational understanding of reality.

OTHER NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVE:

SUFISM: The Sufi epistemological monism—which foretells a potential "subject object merger"—can give a free rein to a Global IR theory that "expands (not displaces)" Eurocentric IR by way of adding a range of novel concepts/perspectives that have hitherto remained exterior to it. For example, the Sufi monist concept of "oneness of reality" (wahdat al-wujūd) is situated on the principle of ana al-Haqq, literally meaning "I am the truth"—in effect, this principle depicts the reality of "one truth" that becomes accessible only when "I" (as subject) sees itself as (or merges itself with) the object (or "truth"). This Sufi monist probability of "subject-object merger" could not only induce a Global IR theory but also problematize a variety of dualist conceptual categories in Eurocentric IR:

ADVAITA MONISM The concept of Advaita is a part of ancient Indian philosophy. Shankara, one of the most revered Indian philosophers and theologians who lived in the 8th century CE, is regarded as the promoter of Advaita as a distinct school of Indian philosophy. Shankara indicated that the Advaitic philosophical tradition existed in the early part of the first millennium CE (Date, 1954). The first complete Advaita work is the 'Mundaka Karika', authored by Gauda pada. Shankara disseminated Advaita vision through his commentaries on the 10 Upanishads, the cryptic Brahma Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita.

Research Gap

Dharma is generally understood as a universal and distinct kind of human practice and institution. Though it is frequently (though not always) defined by 'belief in the supernatural', religion is generally seen as a natural aspect of human experience and action. The invention of religion and religions has also been the modern invention of the non-religious 'secular' domains such as the nation state, politics, economics and international relations. The Mahabharata is one of the world's oldest and longest epics. at the heart of it is a dramatic and apocalyptic war, and a rousing philosophy and morality.

DHARMA: is the religious and moral law governing individual conduct and is one of the four ends of life. In addition to the dharma that applies to everyone (sadharana dharma)—consisting of truthfulness, non-injury, and generosity, among other virtues—there is also a specific dharma (adharma) to be followed according to one's class, status, and station in life.

NON-WESTERN: concept relating to the part of the world that does not include the countries of western Europe and North America which are economically less developed as compared to European or north American countries.

GLOBAL IR: It is the idea of a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to international studies—an attempt to expand and enrich IR by accounting for the ideas and agency of most of humankind. The world is bigger than the West, and a truly Global IR would include international relations and area/regional studies from a multi-thematic and multi-disciplinary perspective. It would incorporate into the curriculum the diversity that exists in our world, including issues related to race, gender, and postcolonial/decolonial identity.

MONISM: Any system of thought which seeks to deduce all the varied phenomena of both the physical and spiritual worlds from a single principle; specifically, the metaphysical doctrine that there is but one substance, either mind (idealism) or matter (materialism), or a substance that is neither mind nor matter, but is the substantial ground of both: opposed to dualism.

SUFISM: may be best described as Islamic mysticism or asceticism, which through belief and practice helps Muslims attain nearness to Allah by way of direct personal experience of God. While there are other suggested origins of the term Sufi, the word is largely believed to stem from the Arabic word suf, which

refers to the wool that was traditionally worn by mystics and ascetics. Belief in pursuing a path that leads to closeness with God, ultimately through encountering the divine in the hereafter, is a fundamental component of Islamic belief. However, in Sufi thought this proximity can be realised in this life.

RATIONAL OF THE STUDY

The study of "Dharma and Relational Ontology" is motivated by a compelling rationale rooted in the pursuit of profound philosophical insights and their practical implications for human interactions. Dharma, as a central concept in ancient Indian philosophy, encapsulates a unique worldview that extends beyond individual actions to encompass the intricate fabric of societal and cosmic relations. The primary rationale for this study lies in the exploration of Dharma's foundational principles and their potential impact on how we understand and navigate the complex tapestry of relationships.

METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively investigate the intricate relationship between Dharma and relational ontology, a methodological framework is employed, encompassing a combination of philosophical analysis, empirical research, and interdisciplinary approaches. This section outlines the systematic steps undertaken to explore the foundational principles of Dharma and their implications for understanding relational dynamics in diverse contexts. In this proposal following methodology has been employed.

Philosophical Analysis: Engaging in a detailed philosophical analysis of the key concepts of

Dharma and relational ontology and examining classical texts like The Mahabharata, Gita, and Ramayana to understand the foundational principles and their implications for relational ontology. **Case Studies:**

Exploring the real-world case studies or historical examples where the principles of Dharma and relational ontology are evident and analysing how individuals, communities, or nations have applied these principles in their decision-making processes, interpersonal relationships, or international interactions. **Comparative**

Analysis: Comparing and contrasting Dharma and relational ontology with Western philosophical and ethical frameworks and Identifying points of convergence, divergence, and potential areas for synthesis.

This comparative approach will enhance the understanding of the unique contributions and challenges posed by Dharma in the context of relational ontology. **Textual Analysis:** Performing a textual analysis of relevant

passages from classical texts to extract and interpreting key principles related to relational ontology and Use of linguistic and semantic analysis has been employed to understand the nuances of the language and expressions used in these texts. **Interdisciplinary Perspective:** An interdisciplinary approach has been applied

to understand the implications of Dharma and relational ontology in various contexts. Here idea of Hindu theology has been applied to the conceptual framework of Eurocentric political science in order to arrive at

relevant conclusion.

Limitations

The concept of *Dharma* is multidimensional and has been interpreted differently across Hindu philosophical schools, Buddhist and Jain traditions, and various historical periods. Since there is no universally accepted definition of Dharma, the study adopts a normative and political understanding of the concept as reflected in classical Indian texts and contemporary scholarly interpretations. This selective approach may not fully encompass all dimensions of Dharma. The study relies extensively on classical sources such as the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana*, and other Indian philosophical literature. These texts are literary, philosophical, and ethical works rather than formal treatises on international relations. Consequently, the strategic and political ideas derived from them are interpretative in nature and may vary across scholars, commentators, and traditions. The research employs a qualitative methodology based on textual analysis, historical interpretation, and review of secondary literature. It does not utilize quantitative techniques, statistical models, or large-scale empirical datasets. Therefore, the findings are analytical and interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. The study does not include extensive fieldwork, interviews with policymakers, diplomats, or international organizations, nor does it employ survey-based methods. As a result, the relationship between Dharmic principles and contemporary foreign policy practices is explored primarily through conceptual analysis rather than direct empirical verification.

Recommendations

Universities and research institutions should encourage the systematic study of Dharmic philosophy within International Relations, Political Science, Strategic Studies, and Global Governance. Incorporating

indigenous intellectual traditions into academic curricula will contribute to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of global politics and help address the dominance of Western theoretical paradigms. Scholars should expand research on non-Western approaches to International Relations by developing theoretical models grounded in indigenous philosophies. Comparative studies between Dharma and other civilizational traditions—such as Ubuntu, Confucianism, Islamic political thought, and Latin American *Buen Vivir*—can enrich debates on ethics, diplomacy, power, and global governance. Governments, universities, and policy think tanks should promote collaborative research among countries of the Global South to develop indigenous perspectives on international politics. Joint academic programmes, policy dialogues, and research networks can facilitate the exchange of ideas and strengthen intellectual autonomy in global knowledge production. Policymakers should consider integrating Dharmic principles such as justice (*Nyaya*), duty (*Dharma*), responsibility, compassion, and peaceful coexistence into foreign policy formulation. While national interests remain important, ethical statecraft can enhance international credibility, trust-building, and sustainable diplomatic engagement.

Conclusion:

The study on "Dharma and Relational Ontology" encompasses a multifaceted exploration of the foundational principles inherent in Dharma and their implications for understanding relational dynamics across various contexts. This research endeavours to unravel the depth and complexity of Dharma, examining its philosophical underpinnings in classical Indian texts such as The Mahabharata, Gita, and Ramayana. The scope extends beyond a mere philosophical inquiry, encompassing an interdisciplinary approach that bridges philosophy, religious studies, and international relations. By investigating the intersections of Dharma and relational ontology, the study aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of human interactions, ethics, and morality. Furthermore, the scope extends to a comparative analysis with Western philosophical traditions, inviting critical engagement and dialogue. The study recognizes the relevance of Dharma in promoting cultural sensitivity, ethical decision-making, and harmonious coexistence, particularly in the context of contemporary international relations. Additionally, the research intends to examine the influence of Dharma on ethical frameworks, encouraging discussions on justice, societal well-being, and the interconnectedness of individuals and communities. This study seeks to address the central inquiry: How does the incorporation of Dharma within the framework of relational ontology contribute to the development of a robust and culturally inclusive ethical paradigm for navigating complex human relationships in contemporary society. Through an exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of Dharma and its integration into relational ontology, the research aims to investigate the nuanced dynamics of ethical decision-making within various relational contexts. Specifically, it will delve into how individuals interpret and apply Dharma principles in their interactions, examining the impact on moral reasoning, interpersonal dynamics, and the broader societal fabric.

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