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**Revisiting Dharma: Contemporary Reflections on
Ethics and Human Values in the *Ramayana* and the
*Mahabharata*****Dr. Sagar C. Vyas**
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Abstract:

The concept of dharma is central to Indian philosophical, cultural, and ethical thought. Its earliest and most profound expressions are found in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two epics that transcend time and continue to influence modern debates on morality, justice, leadership, and human values. This research paper revisits the concept of dharma by engaging with both primary epic narratives and modern scholarly interpretations. It examines how dharma operates as a dynamic and situational principle rather than as a fixed moral code. Through an exploration of characters, moral dilemmas, and narrative structures—supported by ancient commentaries and contemporary criticism—the paper argues that dharma’s adaptability makes it profoundly relevant to present-day ethical challenges. The study highlights the need for contextual morality, compassionate leadership, social responsibility, and emotional intelligence, values that emerge from the epics yet remain vital for the modern world. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have shaped the ethical foundations of Indian civilization for thousands of years. This paper further explores the concept of dharma by examining pivotal episodes, character arcs, and moral dilemmas from both epics. Through interpretative analysis, the study demonstrates how the philosophical essence of dharma offers meaningful guidance for contemporary societal challenges, including leadership, justice, gender relations, emotional intelligence, and the balance between personal and collective responsibilities. By connecting classical insights to modern ethical contexts, the paper highlights the enduring universality and transformative potential of dharma in shaping humane, balanced, and responsible conduct.

Keywords:

Dharma, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Human Values, Moral dilemma.

Introduction:

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are not merely literary monuments; they are cultural, ethical, and philosophical foundations of South Asian civilization. These epics elaborate on the nature of dharma, portraying it as the fundamental principle that guides righteous living. The term encompasses duty, ethics, social order, justice, and spiritual

alignment, yet its meaning shifts according to context, relationships, and moral dilemmas. This fluidity has fascinated scholars from Valmiki and Vyasa to modern thinkers such as R. K. Narayan, Romila Thapar, Robert P. Goldman, A. K. Ramanujan, and Bimal Krishna Matilal. In contemporary society, marked by cultural conflict, technological change, and complex moral situations, revisiting the idea of dharma becomes essential. The epics provide a moral vocabulary to understand individual responsibility, social ethics, and the pursuit of justice. Their enduring wisdom is not limited to religion; it resonates across disciplines such as philosophy, literature, psychology, political science, and leadership studies. This research seeks to illuminate how dharma, through the lens of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, offers profound guidance for ethical living in the modern world. Drawing from ancient textual references, traditional commentaries, and contemporary criticism, it presents a comprehensive and interdisciplinary perspective.

Understanding Dharma: A Philosophical Foundation:

The ancient Indian texts—including the Vedas, Upanishads, Manusmriti, and Puranas—conceive dharma as both cosmic order and individual responsibility. Scholars such as Patrick Olivelle and B. K. Matilal emphasize that dharma in the epics does not function as a rigid framework but as a moral spectrum requiring discernment and self-awareness. Valmiki and Vyasa portray dharma as deeply interwoven with human dilemmas. The epics assert that moral action cannot be reduced to mere rule-following; instead, it emerges from thoughtful reflection, compassion, and an awareness of consequences. Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, echoes this idea when he instructs Arjuna to align action with selfless duty. Thus, dharma becomes a holistic and adaptive system of ethics that evolves with context—an idea highly relevant to contemporary moral philosophy and applied ethics.

Dharma in the Ramayana: Idealism, Duty, and Moral Responsibility:

The *Ramayana* presents an ethical universe shaped by idealism, where characters strive for moral perfection. Yet beneath this idealistic surface lies a complex, emotionally rich exploration of human duty.

Rama represents *maryada puruṣottama*, the ideal human being. His strict adherence to his father's promise, though personally painful, demonstrates the dharma of responsibility and sacrifice. Modern thinkers such as R. K. Narayan and Swami Vivekananda view Rama as a model of ethical leadership—truth-oriented, compassionate, and committed to the greater good. In contemporary governance and corporate ethics, Rama symbolizes integrity over personal gain. His life illustrates that leadership grounded in sacrifice and humility is more enduring than leadership rooted in power or self-interest. Sita's narrative has inspired feminist and cultural reinterpretations. Scholars such as Madhu Kishwar and Arshia Sattar highlight her agency, resilience, and emotional strength. Her choices during exile and the trial by fire reflect her inner dharma—one rooted in truth, dignity, and autonomy rather than passive submission. In modern contexts, Sita's story challenges gendered expectations and promotes dignity, equality, and emotional independence. Ravana is portrayed as a learned ruler (*vidwan*) whose downfall arises from desire and ego. His story cautions against the misuse of knowledge,

unchecked ambition, and moral blindness. In today's world—marked by global conflicts, political corruption, and ethical failures—Ravana's arc remains a powerful reminder of the dangers of hubris.

Dharma in the Mahabharata: Complexity, Conflict, and Moral Ambiguity:

The Mahabharata is a profound study of ethical complexity. Unlike the idealism of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata acknowledges that dharma is often unclear, conflicted, and negotiated through difficult choices. Arjuna's moral paralysis on the battlefield serves as an archetype for modern ethical confusion. Krishna's teachings in the Gita reveal a nuanced understanding of dharma: action must align with duty, intention, and the welfare of society, rather than selfish attachment. The philosophy of *nishkama karma*, championed by modern scholars such as Mahatma Gandhi and Eknath Easwaran, encourages responsible action without obsession over outcomes—an invaluable lesson for contemporary professionals, leaders, and educators. Yudhishtira's dilemmas during the dice game, exile, and war demonstrate that righteousness is seldom straightforward. Scholars such as Romila Thapar and Alf Hiltebeitel argue that Yudhishtira embodies the struggle between personal values and political duty.

His questions remain relevant today:

Is legal correctness enough when moral harm is done?

Can a leader uphold ethical ideals in an unjust environment?

The *Mahabharata* suggests that dharma requires introspection, negotiation, and sometimes painful compromise.

Draupadi's character has inspired significant feminist critique. Her humiliation in the royal court and her powerful resistance symbolize the universal struggle for dignity and justice. Contemporary scholars such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni view Draupadi as a symbol of assertive womanhood, demanding accountability and ethical reform. Both Bhishma and Karna embody the tragic conflict between loyalty and moral responsibility. Their lives illustrate the consequences of choosing allegiance over justice—a dilemma visible today in bureaucratic failures, institutional corruption, and social injustice.

Contemporary Relevance: Dharma as a Framework for Modern Ethical Living:

The enduring relevance of dharma lies in its capacity to adapt to modern concerns.

The epics emphasize self-awareness, discipline, empathy, and responsibility—qualities crucial for emotional well-being and ethical decision-making in today's personal and professional life. Rama's integrity, Krishna's strategic wisdom, and Yudhishtira's moral introspection offer contrasting models of leadership. Together, they demonstrate that ethical governance requires transparency, justice, and compassion. Sita and Draupadi inspire contemporary discussions on women's rights, autonomy, dignity, and resilience. The epics also advocate harmony (*rita*), sustainability, and collective welfare—principles urgently needed in an age defined by environmental crises, technological dilemmas, and social fragmentation.

Conclusion:

Revisiting dharma in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* reveals a deeply layered ethical universe that continues to inspire and challenge modern thinking. These epics do not present morality as a fixed structure but as a dynamic process shaped by human struggle, reflection, and compassion. Whether through Rama's devotion to duty, Sita's strength, Krishna's philosophical clarity, or Draupadi's insistence on justice, the epics provide a rich framework for ethical discourse. In contemporary life—marked by uncertainty, moral conflict, and rapid change—dharma remains a valuable guide. It urges us to balance personal aspirations with the collective good, to uphold justice with humility, and to cultivate values that sustain humanity. Through ancient wisdom and modern interpretation, dharma emerges not only as a cultural legacy but also as a living, transformative principle.

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