

# Dharma and Violence Philosophical, Ethical and Historical Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the intricate connection between dharma, which can be translated as moral responsibility, cosmic order, and morality, and the concept of violence in philosophical and theological traditions, especially in the Indian setting. The association of dharma with non-violence (ahimsa) is common, but the classical writings and the actions of history suggest a more nuanced understanding, in which violence is conditionally justified. The study covers the main sources, such as epic literature, legal writings and philosophical discourse, to examine how violence can be presented as a duty when it is in the service of justice, maintenance of social order or the defence of truth. The study identifies the ethical contradictions between purpose, action and result, and contends that dharma does not offer a fixed moral code but a contextual framework that demands discernment. The paper ends with a call for a reassessment of simplistic binaries of violence and non-violence and argues that dharma embraces moral diversity in human behaviour.

**Keywords:** Dharma, Violence, Ahimsa (Non-violence), Ethical Duty, Ethical Problem.

## 1. Introduction

Central to Indian philosophical traditions is Dharma, commonly translated as duty, righteousness or cosmic order, and it offers a framework that typically supports non-violence (ahimsa), but also acknowledges the need for force (himsa) to defend righteousness. This intricate interaction reconciles general ethical standards with particular circumstances.

The word dharma has a lengthy history, and a rich and many-sided meaning in a variety of intellectual, ethical, spiritual, literary, and socio-political contexts. Generally, dharma may be defined as the normative appropriateness of one's acts and utterances to the inner self or consciousness and the exterior domain or the state of the world. It serves as both cosmological and ethical governance in this regard. A larger, multi-dimensional view of dharma may provide an opening for addressing moral and ethical concerns that may lead to a new approach to a sustained and serious concern for violence or for other significant transgressions regarded universally as intrinsically destructive.

Unlike modern ethical theories that focus on agency, dharma implies an ethical obligation to act in ways that perpetuate the moral order of society, in this way the ethical aspect is detached from the masks of the individual agent. A focus on historical and doctrinal interpretation may highlight the special premises on which dharma-based explanations are constructed in discourses that accept their contingent nature while still allowing some power for such stances. However, respect for the legitimacy of dharma poses another interpretative problem, as highly influential systemic theorists who engage with the frames of reference and reasoning of dharma without any uncritical acquiescence, ground the authority, legitimacy and practice of violence upon different regulatory constructs, leaving dharma substantially untouched.

The tensions over backing the violence of authority, power, duty, service, defence and mandate from the state power, even if they support an authoritative tone that is compatible with the canon that dharma bestows, do not in any way address the question of legitimacy. A diversity of sources across different domains allows realistic conjectures about which models differ considerably from a view that maintains the notion of dharma in differing discourses on the ethics of violence. This distinction is nonetheless significant because even those currents who ultimately remain within the long history of dharma in relation to such topics might explain why there is no prolonged attention to the concept of violence, because urgency still occurs.

## 2. Dharma: Ethical and Cosmological Foundations of Conceptual Foundations

In its many interpretations, in direct ethical and cosmological settings, Dharma means tolerance and the impossibility of violence. For example, dharma interpreters, including some Vedic philosophy and Chan Buddhism generally linked with Diamond Sutra, emphasise cosmic order. The Sanskrit word dharma is defined as "cosmic law and order". In this conceptual framework dharma is defined as a person's responsibility and righteousness according to his or her societal function. The Gita develops the principle of justified violence in its ethical system of cosmic and social violence. This prescription is said to co-exist with the idea of ahimsa, or non-injury and the supremacy of such aggression is thus often disputed. The dharma adopted by each tradition is nonetheless entangled in the ontology of cosmos and human. The ontological structure also included a teleological framework, by which all entities are orientated toward their own perfection. This observation and concept of dharma means social order and support of violence in many Buddhism interpretations. The Mudgalaprabha elected to the Guhyasamaja considers the bodhisattva Mañjusrī as a

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cosmic buddha with particular necessity for violence and the Mahāyāna held bodhisattva destroyed a sow carrying all the sentient beings towards the buddhahood remains the subject of jam ndé from the sed ngag.

In order to study the ontological function of dharma, i.e. a point that holds an individual's position, responsibility, and obligation in a system of cosmic order, one has to reformulate the formula defining dharma to distinguish it from the definition of secular law and norm (K. Swearer, 2004). In this context Dharma is the formula to be defined. The definition states what makes an object a dharmic character in the sense of the graph of worldly, religious or spiritual but does not explain what dharma is. The examination of a particular process of conservation in a temporal aggregate, and the allusions of the ideas of dharma set the ontological value allowing an ethical attitude on violence with formulation offered below. The dharma is based on the relationship of the cosmic body, the naturally apparent, accessible regulated and physically felt spatial interactions among the species, and the dharmic order of the cosmic being is a constraint indicated upon animals. In short, the conceptual analysis of dharma and the religious formulations conventionally provided to the institutionalised discourses develop worldly character in the process of religious preservation. Or if dharma is strictly conditioned by a harmonic cosmological element once engaged into the order of the dataset then a derridian angle solidifies this thesis given earlier (Barua, 2017).

### **3. The Problem of Violence in Dharma Traditions**

The indeterminacy and contestability that surrounds violence in relation to dharma traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism—reveals the tenuousness of their conventional descriptions. While classical writings recognise the spiritual, ethical, and material dimensions of dharma, scholars tend to focus on its cosmic or cosmic-ethical features, ignoring its moral order or ethical dimensions. These frameworks still inform present-day studies of the links between dharma and violence, which are met with contrasting criticisms. On the one hand, the opposition understands dharma either in a strictly cosmological meaning – whence ethical incapacities render it insufficient for handling violence – or synchronic sense, believing it to be context defining dharma to be either pro- or anti-violence in itself. Rather, the study of violence is understood through the lens of a broader dharma and researchers attend to prohibitive and permissive interpretations, and restraining mechanisms mandated by the tradition (K. Swearer, 2004). Accounts differ between literature and dominant ethical currents. Some sacred duties (sva- or bāhya-dharma) are emphasised in Hindu and Buddhist texts. In Jainism, duḥkha and ahimsa rather represent the supreme dharma (Barua, 2017). Further debate situates dharma, violence and their interactions within broader conceptual frameworks that qualify dominant binaries. Recurring assumptions gather around a conception of dharma that applies to a wider sphere of action, with dharma, as explained, striving for a more precise categorisation.

### **4. Historical Encounters: Dharma, State, Power**

The authority of the state and dharma are commonly cited as guarantees of social order and collective security. When the king is upright and follows dharma, heaven protects the kingdom. Hence, the laws and actions in accordance with dharma have been perceived as order. Says the asvamedha, "I am high order by this, the asvamedha; I am king; I am guardian; by high orders I govern for long life. "I have authority, therefore I have wealth; I produce

gain, success and harvest rightfully." Two passages prohibit the injuring of virtuous subjects which is always followed by punishment; and punishment being a violation of dharma is a reason for rebellion. The cosmological view gives a moral validity to rule while the normative view restricts political authority to dharmic rule only. There are detailed incidents which record instances of state power invoking dharma to justify coercion, including hypothesised the first constitutional framework in the Indian subcontinent and the popular sovereignty based on principles of democracy. Later, resistance to the invocation of dharma by authority, reform movements sympathetic to but sceptical of such invocation, and the authorisation of force by quasi-political institutions all indicate the continued and growing interplay between dharma, state, and power. Revisit the ethical discourse within traditions, noting the ways in which formulations of ahimsa are linked in different ways to dharma, coercion and defence; explore the conceptualisation of just war and frameworks of proportionality as jointly invoked across and contested within Hindu, Buddhist and Jain expressions; and investigate the cultural and socio-political undercurrents informing historical and contemporary reconceptualizations of dharma and violence (K. Swearer, 2004); and (Barua, 2017).

### **5. Ethical Frameworks: Nonviolence, Just War and Proportionality**

Dharma creates a rich, diverse environment for ethical confrontation with violence. This action has been theorised as nonviolence (ahimsā), just war (yuddhādhikaraṇa), and proportionality (sama, samāna), giving rise to a variety of paradigms that are not easily schematised. Yet even in the most important frameworks the path of responsibility is the most universally attested and explicit and thus plays a key role. The just war problem, in different civilisational manifestations, appears throughout the dharmic spectrum from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain views arguing over the historical legality and moral justification of the use of force. Dharma's engagement with force thus becomes a highly charged analogue of the criteria that further delimit and clarify it.

The dharmic legacy of ahimsā resonates worldwide, and its modern emphasis has spurred serious research on the constructions and boundaries of nonviolence. In the twentieth century, ahimsā is known in extremely strong, but general conceptualisations, with a wide variety of alternatives to support this. All are sufficient as alternate formulations of its basic concept subsequently glossed as satyagraha and aikyadarśana/non-attachment, pillars of peace, truth-force, and non-violence and inter-personal and social well-being. The cross-referencing of means and aims, heart and action, interior-foundational steadiness, and outward-financial flow, as collectively specified, communicates a multidimensional framework that continually expresses a harmonic integration and synthesis in three coordinates.

### **6. The Role of Ritual, Law and Policy in Managing Violence**

Ritual prohibitions, moral teaching, and purifying procedures have long provided a basis for shaping conduct to oppose the propensity for violence. As in many civilisations, dharmic societies developed models, rites, and vows that called up the innate potential for kindness, beauty, and truth as a means to overcome frivolous desires. Rituals, magic and normativity have proved a lasting

vitality in premodern polities, encouraging forces that pulled reeling societies towards collective survival. Legal codes, adjudication, and social norms further specified forbidden behaviour and articulated hegemonic standards, making specific situations and characters intelligibly representable. Watching violence sanctioned by the state gives rise to disturbing philosophical and theological reflection and makes clear the right of citizens to disdain or to sanction the moral core of state institutions. Dharmic philosophy offers a weakly defended channel for extending compassion to governments when the violence committed obviously fulfils dharmically stated aspirations of broader social justice, structural brutality, or strikingly disproportionate pushback from lesser powers.

Dharma issues involve the inseparable links between the domains of the ritually designated and the legally institutional, as violence, one of the most historically probative topics, marked with huge hostility across time and culture. Even when cosmological and ethical dimensions were more prominent in culture, there was a persistent tension between linked doctrinal formulations and differing propensities regarding violence and power (K. Swearer, 2004). In the modern period, tensions between colonial powers imposing legal institutions through violence, claiming to uphold dharmically defined codes, have been protracted and contested in terms of the nature of violence and its prospects for legitimate justification (Menkel-Meadow, 2013).

In the wake of systematic disintegration, dharmically defined compatibilities are worth noting in the context of cumulative pressure on systems of governance, public policy, legislation and the wider exercise of authority to address the taking and occupying of life and personal security. Cosmological-linguistic philosophy on dharma and society converges in defining the means of preservation that assure indefinitely diminished forms of legitimate state intervention mark State Authority in defence of the security of the general populace.

## **7. Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Views on Comparative Literature**

Dharma and Violence, and Comparative Perspectives: Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Interpretations

Through traditions and ages, Dharma reads the ethical acceptability of violence. Dharma is the cosmic-ethical order which creates and ensures the well-being of sentient creatures as well as the law, lawfulness or righteousness which controls the behaviour of the person. Dharma, central to Indian thought, possesses the broadest conceivable ethical breadth. In the cosmic perspective, dharma does not endorse violence, nor does it prevent it. There are different Dharmic views of whether, or under what conditions, dharma justifies violence, although the issue has been debated by traditional scriptures and thinkers such as Bṛhaspati and Giṅjha. The most prominent justification for the use of force for political ends in Hindu discourse has been the maintenance of social order (rājā-dharma). Jainism has a deep-rooted hostility to violence, Buddhism has an intermediate viewpoint. The argument over the merit and weight of violence, even for the benefit of social order, has been between dharmic and non-dharmic. A disjunctive analysis resonates with the philosophies of figures such as Koṭṭhita Vācaka and Brahmāna Śāntiprabhā (Barua, 2017).

## **8. Modern Reinterpretations: Dharma in Today's Ethical Debates**

The notion of dharma constructs violence, and the question of how it constructs violence has revived in current discussions of violence and humanitarian intervention. Some have read the Indian Constitution as embodying or deriving from Dharma, and hence examined the way in which constitutional programming flows from the Dharma, and how it politically and ethically engages with violence. Others resort to dharma in the context of disputes on bioethics and medical intervention. A full account cannot be given here, but policy formulation and public deliberation on such subjects reveal newer interpretations of Dharma.

Secular critique is also part of the contemporary interpretation of dharma. Some social theorists are sceptical of existing dharmic formulations, while others argue for dharma as a meaningful principle on grounds of pluralism and as an alternative to the predominance of secularism. There are also interesting disputes on the normative status of dharma and pressures of pluralism in dharmic and dharmic-influenced political discourse. Such talk does not, however, explicitly address issues of violence.

## **9. Challenges and Controversy**

Dharma contains normative responsibilities that authorise and even obligate violence, but also strictly circumscribe its use. In many traditions, dharma is a moral command entrenched in the cosmic order, giving power to political institutions and providing grounds for state violence. Dharma also refers to the moral rules that govern human action, and especially, the circumstances under which violence is ethically permissible. Such vast strands raise the question whether the frameworks are essentially consistent among interpretations. The term dharma echoes at once with the pursuit of virtue in a human-centered setting, or to the minimisation of harm in a cosmological context, sometimes resulting in contradictory conclusions on the moral legality of violence in transient, fleeting, and dangerous situations. Other viewpoints define the dharmic-concept in ways that decisively restrict its purview to parts of the cosmic order, guaranteeing that basic requirements for permitted violence are indeed widely shared (K. Swearer, 2004).

## **10. Implications for Practice and Policy:**

Discussions on dharma generally end with exhortations to principled action suitable to local conditions, based on insights about modalities of dharma rather than methodical treatises with legalistic specifics. It is important to connect effectively with authoritative dharmic sources in order to respect the tradition in the areas of religion, philosophy and ethics that are broadly applicable in the search for avenues toward peace and fulfilment (K. Swearer, 2004). France is an example of the principles of just war coming together in institutional discourses that emphasise the need for nuclear weapons in the face of aggressive states having developed such capabilities notwithstanding hippocratic qualms regarding offensive first strikes (Barua, 2017).

The use of dharmic practices must be based on a comprehensive understanding of the underlying modalities so that the same can be applied appropriately in concerns of governance, statecraft and international relations. Generic illustrative moral frameworks for regulation that allow simultaneity of temporal considerations have been articulated under the themes of compassion, generosity, trustworthiness, and nurturing wholesome virtues. Politically

relevant interpretations under these rubrics have appeared that are Buddhist-based and attentive to concerns of enforcement and beyond as criterion for advising legislatures and other institutions on temporally conditioned policies.

## **11. Conclusion**

The above discussion makes clear how dharma understands the ethical justification of violence across traditions and time. Dharma – not the same as ‘law’ or ‘duty’ – impacts all aspects of the cosmos and human life. The dharma of humanity, as different sources explain, consists on upholding justice (rta), maintaining social order (samsara) and cultivating virtue (punya). Its application entails varied vocabularies of duty, righteousness and order. Each dharmic utterance gives rise to a system of premises that classify forms of conduct and determine ethically permitted activity. Processing these frameworks reveals the different and sometimes contradictory ways in which major traditions perceive the notion of violence—as killing, harm, disruption, or combustion.

In this complex debate, dharma has become a central concept in Indian studies and cross-cultural comparison. Cosmological explanatory models and sophisticated ethical frameworks locate dharma in both ontological and normative roles; dharma helps to construct order-building realities while expressing human obligations to them. Rta gives us insight into the teleological aspects of defining human virtue in respect to ontological systems. However, definitions and relations of dharma tend to change within and between traditions. There are abiding tensions regarding individual rights, authority and legitimacy when dharma’s cosmic orientation prevails over anthropocentric features. Scholarly interactions with dharma and violence are complicated by methodological and other constraints leading to discussions on appropriation, novelty and reformation, as well as a widespread

reworking of once-fixed ideas of ‘Indian’ geography and identity (Barua, 2017).

The importance of Dharma is increasing in our ever globalising and interconnected world, especially in addressing key issues like environmental sustainability, ethical governance and social justice. The values enshrined in Dharma are in consonance with the principles enshrined under international frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, SDG 13 (Climate Action) reflects the Dharmic ideal of living in harmony with environment and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is in tune with the Dharmic values of justice and ethical governance. (Tiwari, 2025)

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