

Dharma

The author, one of the most applauded authorities in the field of Sanskrit literature (particularly the great Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*), explores how the concept of *dharma* developed and was affirmed in South Asia. Alf Hiltebeitel is an authority in the study of *dharma* and this text confirms his erudition. (An encyclopaedic volume titled *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative* has been announced for publication in 2011 by Oxford University Press.)

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Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2010.

Dharma.

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

ISBN: 9780824834869

THE VOLUME IS PART OF A SERIES – ‘Dimensions of Asian Spirituality’ – that targets a non-specialist readership and is therefore an introductory text. However, *Dharma* is not an introductory volume – accurate and well-written as it may be. A good deal of previous knowledge is assumed. Undergraduate students, as well as average readers with an interest in Asian spirituality will struggle reading this book. This is an academic product that requires either the support of an instructor or a certain familiarity with South Asian history, Vedic culture, Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and related philosophical systems. Explanatory notes could have been helpful, but the book lacks an apparatus of notes. Instead Hiltebeitel provides the neophyte with translation of Sanskrit terms, a short glossary, an index, and a carefully selected list of references which – I am sure – will encourage and support readers to deepen their knowledge of *dharma*.

The structure of *Dharma* is carefully explained, but it is questionable. Hiltebeitel, after an extremely useful etymological analysis of the term *dharma* (including its Vedic antecedent, *dharma*) and cognate key-words (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*, *yoga*), introduces the reader to primary sources. These are presented as ten ‘scriptures’ (or, one should say, bodies of scriptures) in Sanskrit and Pali, and divided in two clusters. Cluster A includes: 1) early Buddhist texts; 2) *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*; 3) the edicts of Aśoka; 4) Gautama’s *Dharmasūtras*; and 5) *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtras*. Cluster B discusses *dharma* in: 6) the *Mahābhārata*; 7) the *Rāmāyaṇa*; 8) the *Dharmaśāstra* of Manu; 9) *Dharmasūtras* of *Vasiṣṭha*; and 10) the *Buddhacarita* of *Aśvaghoṣa*.

Hiltebeitel justifies such sequence by referring to historical data such as the reign of selected dynasties and war campaigns. Yet most connections are in fact thematic, not chronological. While this may sound obvious (or unavoidable) to the expert reader, the neophyte will find it confusing. For instance, Hiltebeitel begins with an examination of King Aśoka’s famous edicts (260-240 BCE), he goes back to Vedic culture (the *Rig Veda* is dated 1500-1000 BCE circa) and then jumps to the Maurya (circa fourth century BCE) and *Kuṣāṇa* dynasties (second century CE). A chronological table would have been appropriate.

A further problem emerges when one considers the fact that *dharma* is explored only within (certain forms of) Hinduism and Buddhism. Why have other Hindu and Buddhist traditions (e.g. Tantra) not been considered? And what about South Asian indigenous religions such as Jainism and Sikhism and their understanding of *dharma* (or *dharam*)? Overall the book gives the idea that *dharma* is a strictly Hindu and Buddhist concept.

The marginalisation of minority faith communities extends to the exclusion of peripheral regions of South Asia. The book contributes to perpetuate the false equation that ‘India is South Asia’ as the two terms are used interchangeably. Hiltebeitel states that: ‘The *Rigveda* is India’s oldest textual source [...]’ (19) while his geographical notion of South Asia (3) does not include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and – by extension – Myanmar and Tibet. The spirituality, religious practices and scriptures of all these countries have, in one way or the other, absorbed the



Above: Depiction of Viśvākarma – the Mahābhārata describes him as the lord of the arts, executor of a thousand handicrafts, the carpenter of the gods, the most eminent of artisans, the fashioner of all ornaments ... and a great and immortal god.

concept of *dharma* presented by Hiltebeitel, and contributed to its spread in surrounding areas, such as Central and Southeast Asia. In particular, given Hiltebeitel’s interest in *Buddha dhamma*, it is surprising he fails to include contemporary Bangladesh, which together with West Bengal, hosts an important Buddhist tradition and has produced a rich literature in both Sanskrit and vernacular.

Besides the above mentioned problems, I would like to note that most of the central chapters revolve around characters of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. No doubt Hiltebeitel is in his element. The analysis of *dharma* as constructed in the narrative cycles of the great Sanskrit epics is of great value. The author makes a very clear summary of the main episodes of both texts and then engages with an enlightening critical reflection about ways in which *dharma* is lived and interpreted by the characters according to their role, gender, social position, skills and flaws. Hiltebeitel magisterially discusses both scriptures (though very different in nature) as actual manuals of *dharma*. This includes references to one of the most popular Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the dominant *bhakti* (devotional) tradition. It is therefore regretful that he does not feel the urge to mention other cultural contexts. In South Asia *dharma* is a living concept deeply embedded at all level of Indic societies. It insinuated itself across different religious traditions (from tribal cultures to non-indigenous minority faiths like Islam, Judaism and Christianity). Further to that, *dharma* is not confined to Sanskrit/Pali scriptures, as the lay reader may believe. Vernacular literatures and oral narratives across the subcontinent have engaged with localised representations and exegeses of *dharma*. For instance, there is no analysis of gods linked to *dharma* (or deities actually called ‘*Dharma*’), such as Yama, but also folk variants of *Sūrya*, *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva*. (In Bengali folklore, *Dharmarāj* is one of the most popular gods who is the object of several auspicious poems – the *dharmamaṅgalkāvyā*.)

Hiltebeitel, in his last chapter, does mention the evolution of *dharma* in the twenty-first century, but this fails to meet expectations. He just refers in one short paragraph (164) to Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, the US show *Dharma and Greg*, the acclaimed television series *Lost* and the documentary film *Dhamma Brothers*. Colonial and post-colonial discourses on *dharma* are not discussed, as well as its globalisation and affirmation (also exploitation) in the most disparate contexts (e.g., politics, economics, health and support services, entertainment, visual arts, education, the World Wide Web, etc.). Hiltebeitel’s exploration of the ‘*Dharma* for the Twenty-First Century’ is inextricably bound to the Hindu and Buddhist classical scriptural traditions.

This book gives a partial introduction to *dharma* and the spirituality related to it. I am well aware that an introductory text could not possibly address all of the aspects of a multi-faceted founding concept of South Asian culture like *dharma*. Hiltebeitel’s *Dharma* – despite the problems I have highlighted – is an academic work, which wisely summarises important aspects of two Indic religious and cultural traditions. By reading the jacket, the editor’s preface and the introductory material (Ch. 1), one might expect a somewhat different work than *Dharma* happens to be. Although key features are discussed with sufficient clarity, the author never feels the necessity to go beyond the limits established by the Sanskrit and Pali classical traditions. This is, however, a compelling work, rich in instructive narrative and strategic in supporting teachers in their effort to foster the interest of future generations of students of South Asian cultures and religions.

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