SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

REVISITING DHARMA THROUGH FEMINIST LENS: ETHICS, DUTY AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN THOUGHT

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Introduction:

In Hindu Philosophy, *dharma* is understood as the universal principle that sustains and harmonizes the cosmos, guiding both natural and human existence towards spiritual evolution. Derived from the Sanskrit root "*dhr",* which means "to uphold" or "to sustain", *dharma* is closely linked to *ṛta*, the cosmic order. Though later it expanded its field to include the constantly growing complexities of human life. Philosophers like Jaimini and *Kumārila* understood *dharma* as actions aligned with *Vedic* injunctions; for Buddhists, it denotes the cosmic law; as for Jains, it represents moral virtues. Thus *dharma* embodies a dynamic moral and philosophical principle that integrates law, ethics, duty and spirituality, serving as the foundation of both individual and cosmic harmonious order. Alongside, it also integrated gender roles, setting the field for oppression of women, based on which the Hindu fundamentalists are claiming the validity of women's subordinate position in sociocultural realm. The codification of *strī-dharma*, a woman's moral and spiritual duty, within classical scriptures such as *Manusmṛti* or *Dharmaśāstras* defined female virtue as unwavering obedience, chastity and sacrifice. Within this framework, the ethical subject is always a male, depicted as autonomous and moral, while women's moral positions were dependent on her husband's or the family's orders. Undoubtedly, the early Vedic philosophy, the very foundation of *sanātan dharma*, portrayed the feminine as sacred and creative force, symbolised by *śakti*, the divine force that sustains the universe. However with the evolving society and shifting historical and political dynamics, the original philosophical inclusivity of the Vedas was gradually misinterpreted to benefit dominant classes, kings and elite males, leading to a patriarchal reconstruction of socio-religious life.

Thus, a feminist philosophical inquiry from a contemporary lens into *dharma* becomes a re-exploration of Indian moral reasoning itself, rather than a mere critique of patriarchy. Feminist thinkers like Uma Chakravarti, Nivedita Menon, Gayatri Spivak and Rita Gross have demonstrated how gendered interpretations of religion and ethics impact one's lived experiences and use the language of virtue to uphold societal inequalities. Reading of these critiques along with profound western thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir's "gender as social construct" (Beauvoir, 2015) and Carol Gilligan's ethics of care calls for a reinterpretation of *dharma* as relational and contextual rather than mandated

obedience. The challenge lies not in disregarding the concept of *dharma* altogether, but in retrieving its philosophical potential in gender sensitized contemporary sense.

This paper argues that a feminist reclamation of *dharma* can upgrade the concept into an ethics of autonomy, relationally and equality from imposed obedience that reeks of patriarchy. Drawing upon both Indian and Western feminist philosophers, it investigates how *dharma* might be re-envisioned as a contemporarily relevant and evolving moral framework, sensitive to gendered experience and social dynamics. By analyzing classic Indian scriptures and engaging feminist perspective, this study aims to contribute to contemporary Indian philosophical discussion and proposes a feminist *dhārmic* ethics, an approach that retains the spiritual depth of Indian moral philosophy while aligning it with egalitarian and emancipatory values.

Historical and Philosophical Context of Dharma:

Dharma is semantically equivalent to the Greek word 'ethos'. The Sanskrit word *dharma* refers to "the correct way of life" (Garg, 2022) ethically and "the path to greater truths" (Garg, 2022) spiritually. The roots of *dharma* lie in the Vedic concept of *ṛta*, a teleological structure in reality, a purposeful cosmic and moral order that sustains harmony in the universe. *Dharma* evolved from this idea, functioning as the force that maintains balance, eliminates evil and ensures universal wellbeing. As *Kaṇāda* explains in the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras*, *dharma* leads to both material prosperity and spiritual advancement. It is inherently communitarian as it promotes interdependence and coexistence.

Dharma has two inseparable aspects: constitutive and regulative. In its constitutive sense, *dharma* is the law of being, the essential quality. Every *padārtha* (entity) possesses its own dharma; and thus, *dharma* not only defines the essence of things but also guides their evolution and contributes to the welfare of the cosmos (*abhyudaya* and *niḥśreyasa*). Texts like the *Bhagavadgītā* and the writings of Sri Aurobindo affirm that every being must act according to its own nature (s*vabhāva-dharma*) while contributing to the larger whole. This reflects the metaphysical unity of existence, where peace, perfection, and harmony depend on the conscious cooperation of all beings. While its essence is eternal, *dharma* is dynamic and evolving within human consciousness. Ethical and spiritual development occurs through *sādhana* (discipline) as individuals strive towards *mokṣha*. Different people and the same person at different life stages follow distinct dharmas: *svadharma* (personal duty), *varṇadharma* (social class duty), *kuladharma* (family duty), and *yugadharma* (duty of the age), *āshramadharma* (life duty), *mānavadharma* (humanism), *rājadharma* (duty of a king), *āpatdharma* (emergency duty). These varied dharmas ensure social order while recognising human diversity. *Dharma* thus acts as the regulating principle that harmonies personal and social conduct. *Dharma's*

scope includes all aspects of human life and is central to the fourfold goals of life (*puruṣārthas): artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desire), *dharma* (righteousness), and *mokṣha* (liberation). A well-lived life balances these goals under *dharma's* guidance, ensuring that individual and social welfare align. The *Dharmaśāstras* made *dharma* the cornerstone of moral and social order, presenting it as the foundation of Hindu ethics and law. In the ethical and legal realms, *dharma* governs human action (*puruṣakāra*). It represents virtue (*śīla)* and righteous conduct, leading towards *mokṣha.*

The concept of *dharma* originated in the Vedas, where it stood for social and cosmic norms and was primarily ritualistic, being tied to the performance of Vedic rites and duties. The *Puruṣa Sūkta* (ṚV 10.90) illustrates this by linking the primordial sacrifice (*yajña*) with the first *dharmans*, representing the prototype for all future rituals. Over time, *dharma* evolved beyond its ritual connotations to portray moral, legal and social norms, becoming the ultimate legal and ethical framework and ultimately "the central concept of Indian civilisation" (Olivelle, 2005). The *Mīmāṃsā* school of philosophy played a vital role in legitimising this expansion from ritual duties to broader sociocultural obligations.

The vast *dharma* literature is categorised into three areas: *ācāra* (conduct), *vyavahāra* (legal procedures), and *prāyaścitta* (penance). Its historical expansion is divided into three main periods: the *Dharmasūtras* (3rd–1st centuries BCE) belong to late Vedic literature, with key thinkers like *Āpastamba, Baudhāyana*, Gautama and Vasiṣṭha. The *Dharmaśāstras* (1st–6th centuries CE), such as the *Manusmṛti* and *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, expanded on these foundations, belonging to *Smṛti* literature. Lastly, from the 8th -9th centuries CE, a rich tradition of commentaries and compilations (*Nibandhas*) emerged, exemplified by Vijñāneśvara's *Mitākṣarā* and Lakṣmīdhara's *Kṛtyakalpataru*, which systematically interpreted, unified, and adapted *dharma* to changing social and regional backgrounds. In this later *Smṛti* and *Dharmaśāstra* texts, particularly *Manusmṛti* and *Yājñavalkyasmṛti, dharma* came to denote a codified set of sociomoral conducts, seeking to promote social harmony, but instead institutionalised inequality among casts and gender. As a result, women's dharma or *strī-dharma* was defined in terms of oppression, effectively subordinating their moral agency to patriarchal norms.

Despite its vastness, *dharma* literature reflects only the viewpoint of the Brahmins, whose goal was to establish Brahmanical supremacy. The shift in their roles from ritual specialists to political positions like advisers in administration, law and statecraft occurred as Vedic chiefdoms disintegrated and new kingdoms arose, pushing Brahmins to adapt to their new authoritarian roles. This transformation was intensified by Mauryan rulers like Aśoka, who turned away from serving

Brahminical interests, and by the rise of ascetic traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism. Out of this changing context emerged a broader concept of dharma, integrating:

1. Ritual and social duties (*varṇa–āśrama dharma*)
2. Secular law (*vyavahāra*) codified into coherent systems
3. Ethical-ascetic principles like non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and non-stealing (*asteya*).

The inclusion of *rājadharma* (king's law) within dharma marked a turning point. Originating in *Arthaśāstra* traditions, it connected the king's ritual purity with his social responsibilities, combining the religious and legal spheres. Over time, religious and secular laws became inseparable, though *Dharmaśāstras* represented only one among many sources of law, coexisting with regional and communal systems. This comprehensive *dharma* encompassing ritual, ethical, legal, political and cultural dimensions is reflected in epics like the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, where it signifies moral rightness, justice and inner character. Eventually, dharma came to be synonymous with religion, expressed through the idea of *sanātanadharma* (eternal *dharma*), symbolizing the evolution of *dharma* from ritual principle to sociocultural system and finally to a religious standing.

The Feminist Critique of Dharma and Gendered Ethics:

In the early Vedic period (1500-600 BCE) women held almost equal status to men as they participated in *Upanayana sanskār* and had the choice to pursue higher education to become *brahamavādinis* or live a domestic life as *sadhyavadhus*. We find women scholars such as *Lopāmudrā*, *Apālā*, Aditi and *Mamtā* composing hymns of Rig *Veda*. Traces of practices like child marriage or dowry can't be found and widow marriage was accepted. However, a preference for male offspring is apparent through Vedic hymns that sought valorous sons. Women were largely portrayed as mothers, wives and goddesses, which symbolises fertility and strength. Over time, as the Aryans became more settled in Northern India, women's status significantly declined in later Vedic period (1000-600 BCE). By the later Vedic and Puranic periods, women's status had deteriorated drastically. Practices like Sati, though absent in Vedic texts, emerged alongside stricter expectations for widows to live in austerity and denial. The notion of *strī-dhan,* originally intended as a woman's personal wealth, transformed into the oppressive dowry system. The *Puranas*, composed between 750 BCE and 350 BCE and compiled under the Gupta dynasty, reflect this patriarchal transformation. Texts like the *Vishnu Purāṇa* advised men to marry girls one-third their age, prescribing obedience and worship from wives. The *Skanda Purāṇa* prohibited women from uttering their husbands 'names, and the *Garuda Purāṇa* stressed son-bearing as essential for salvation. By this period, society had become fully patriarchal, reducing women to property that could be bought, sold, or gifted. The assimilation of non-Aryan

groups as *Śudras*, providing cheap labor and women for exploitation, further entrenched gender inequality. As scholars Tharu and Lalita (1991) note, the patriarchal ideals of Vedic and post-Vedic thought emerged partly from a struggle against earlier matrilineal and materialist cultures, marking a significant shift from women's once-equal position to systemic oppression and gender polarity in Indian society.

Then in the 1st to 6th century CE was the period of *Dharma śāstras,* among which the *Smṛtis,* particularly the *Manusmṛti* (probably formulated between 200 BCE and 200 CE)*,* laid down the derogatory moral and social codes that are still nowadays continuing to influence the perceptions of women's role and conduct in modern society. While Manu in his *Smṛti* is prescribing *Upanayana* for the boys of the first three Varnas, he is stating, marriage is the only Vedic sacrament or rite of initiation for girls. According to the text, for girls, husband is the only teacher and household duties are equivalent to tending of fire. Consequently, the era of *Manusmṛti* instrumentally made girls lost their right to education. Manus also strictly instructed, girls should be married before reaching puberty, which could literally be interpreted as that, a mature, aged person had the freedom to marry an underage girl. This text was almost a guidebook for women to stay in their ideal manner- women must stay within the four walls of household, must not act by herself, must always have a smile on their faces, and must be an expert of household works. Their utmost purpose of existence was to serve their husbands and bear male children keeping the lineage alive. Portrayal of such gender roles in traditional Hindu scriptures, based on the concept of *dharma*, encompassed moral and social duties for both the genders. Men were typically assigned the role of the provider and protector of the family, while women were assigned the role of nurturing and managing the household. This division of labour is what lead to the expectation that men would engage in external work and women would focus on domestic responsibilities. *Pativratā dharma* is a traditional expectation from women within Hinduism, which emphasizes a woman's commitment to her husband and her household, as loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice are ideals associated with a *pativratā patnī* (devoted wife). Regarding the duties of women Manu mentions in his laws that "a true wife should always attend her husband like a God, even if he is ill-mannered, of licentious habits or destitute of good qualities" (Dutta & Goswami, 2021, p.-215). Also, a childless and penniless widow must remain chaste, self-controlled and patient till the end of her life, since remarriage for a woman is shameful and "such a woman falls off from her place in the other world (Dutta and Goswami, 2021, p.-216). While on the contrary, if a woman has drinking problem, commits any misconduct, is rebellious, sick, mischievous or wasteful, she should be replaced. Not only that, many more disgraceful interpretations of these terms can be found through the text and other scriptures on *Manusmṛti.* For instance, by 'misconduct 'Manu means a woman who is not enough

religious and is not committed to rituals. The term 'barren 'also stands for many instances like, whose children die off, one who only bears daughters. Such practices presented in the name of *dharma* in various Hindu scriptures, have shaped our minds in such distortion that still days women are suffering from these ancient taboos.

Feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti and Nivedita Menon argues that such institutionalized and weaponized concept of *dharma* naturalized patriarchy, implying that gender hierarchy follows from the eternal cosmic order, rather than a historical creation. Chakravarti portrays further how religious discourse manipulated the mobility and sexuality of women in order to maintain caste purity while simultaneously exploiting the labour of lower caste women. By identifying this crucial link. She shows how Brahmanical vision of *dharma* was never an abstract ethical system, but a socially situated ideology, making female virtue not only a personal moral concern, rather a collective religious obligation. Michael Foucault's notion of "disciplinary power" (Foucault, 1975) resonates here: prescriptive *dharma* functions as a moral technology that shapes behavior through internalized norms. Women's moral worth is measured by conformity to set gender roles and deviation is equated with disorder or sin.

Arti Dhand in her essay *The Subversive Nature of Dharma in Mahabharata* (2002) argues, how despite portraying *dharma* as an ambiguous and context sensitive, subjective concept for men, it becomes enabling and oppressive moral code of conducts that bind them within the patriarchal hierarchy. She shows how female characters like Draupadi and Kunti are judged within the androcentric parameter of duty and honour, even though their actions had their own strength and reasoning. Dhand provides us a philosophical interpretation of Draupadi's defiance in *Kaurava* court as a challenge to the misogynistic misuse of *dharma* to justify injustice. Her feminist standpoint intends to reclaim *dharma* as a cite of moral negotiation, where a woman's ethical reasoning and empirical knowledge hold equal authority to that of any male.

Rita Gross, a Buddhist feminist theologian, in her works like *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993) and *A Garland of Feminist Reflections* (2009) argues that, while the philosophical teachings of both Hinduism and Buddhism contain equal liberatory potential for both genders, their institutionalised versions have been shaped by patriarchal intentions. She explains how *dharma*, originally a path towards truth and liberation, was gradually moulded into gendered codes of conduct that constrained women's autonomy. Gross emphasizes how in South Asian context *strī-dharma* (women's duty) is tied to chastity, motherhood and acts of service, thus reducing moral agency to obedience. She doesn't dismiss *dharma*, but reclaims it as spiritual praxis grounded in justice, compassion and

interdependence, values that transcend gender hierarchies. Her feministic hermeneutics aims to recover *dharma* as a relational ethic that honours care and empathy while rejecting domination and exclusion. By situating feminist ethics within the concept of *dharma*, Gross offers a model of contextual university: a moral framework which is culturally rooted, yet inclusive and transformative.

On the other hand, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's view on *dharma* is less theological and more deconstructive. Drawing from post-colonial theory, Spivak examines how *dharma*, as an ethical discourse, intersects with colonial and patriarchal power structure. In her essays, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and *Righting Wrongs* (2004), she critiques the way *dharma* has been historically used to silence the subaltern, especially women, by framing obedience and self-sacrifice as prime virtues. Spivak's reading of texts like *Mahābhārata* and *Manusmṛti* reveals how working as a language of authority dharma promotes structural violence. E.g., the glorification of Sati or widow chastity within the discourse of dharma are the instances of "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988). However, Spivak doesn't discard indigenous ethics; rather she proposes a "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1985), a conscious, temporary reclamation of cultural concept like *dharma* for emancipatory purposes. She urges feminist philosophers to inhabit *dharma* critically, to reinterpret it as a moral responsibility grounded in self-reflexivity, not subservience. Through her postcolonial feminist lens, *dharma* becomes a site of ethical translation, a space for subalterns to converse with Western universalism and Brahmanical patriarchy. Such feministic reclamation and reinterpretation offers a cosmopolitan ethics that is attentive to history, hierarchy and silenced voices.

Reconstructing Dharma through Feminist Ethics:

A feminist reclamation of *dharma* demands more than just mere critique, it requires a complete reimagination of moral order itself. It must reinterpret *dharma* as praxis, ethical action committed to dismantling systems of oppression while cultivating compassion and fairness. The challenge however lies in maintaining the philosophical richness of *dhārmic* tradition while disentangling it from patriarchy and caste-hierarchy that have historically polluted the concept. A feminist *dhārmic* ethics thus must emerge as both a critique and philosophical reconstruction rooted in relationally, autonomy and justice. should be interpreted not as blind obedience towards a moral code of conducts, but a dynamic moral consciousness that evolves with epistemic experience and social transformation. This shift finds its ground in theories of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, whose theories of care ethics emphasise empathy, interdependence and morality grounded in human relationships rather than abstract principles.

In *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan demonstrates how women often deal with moral dilemmas not through abstract logic, but through an ethics of care, which is attentive to nuances of relationships, empathy and human connection. She shows us that this approach is not morally inferior. Rather this perspective grants women the virtue of integrated caring, long devalued in patriarchal frameworks. By applying her theory to the framework of *dharma*, we can see that traditional Hindu ethics has constructed *dharma* as a justice-oriented hierarchical notion of duty. And duties were distributed according to the hierarchies of caste and gender. A Gilliganian interpretation of *dharma* will challenge this codified morality with foregrounding context and moral particularity. *Dharma* can be redefined as a moral process based on needs of others and nuances of lived experiences, rather than being a women's submission to a fixed role.

Nel Noddings in her *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), develops another theory on care ethics based on care and relationality. For her, ethics begin not from rules, but from the "encounter between the one-caring and the cared-for" (Noddings, 1984), as moral action arises from attention, empathy and the desire to sustain the wellbeing of others. This stand is similar to Indian ethical concept of *karuṇā* (compassion) found in both Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. If we analyze *dharma* through Noddings' lens, it is not just externally imposed duty anymore, but a responsive moral awareness, a commitment to act out of compassion rather than obligation. The traditional view on *dharma* often denied women's agency by defining care as subservience, while Noddings' philosophy restores agency to care, framing it as an active moral intelligent practice. Through this reconstruction, *dharma* becomes relational ethics, an ethics that acknowledges mutual dependance and shared vulnerability. Thus, moral authority shifts from patriarchal institutions to lived human experience and *dharma* can be reclaimed as an embodied, compassionate and egalitarian moral practice.

Again, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) provides another power packed philosophical viewpoint to challenge traditional gendered notion of *dharma*, as she asserts, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 2015), revealing that gender is not a biological destiny but a social construction, a set of roles, expectations and norms imposed by patriarchal society. While applying to the Indian ethical context, Beauvoir's theory exposes how *strī-dharma* functions as a tool of social conditioning and dictates how an ideal woman should be: obedient, pure, self-sacrificing, chaste and thus transforms cultural ideology into moral duty. A feminist reconstruction of *dharma* by Beauvoir will therefore seek to denaturalize gender morality. It argues that women's *dharma* should not be predefined by their reproductive ability or domestic roles, but must emerge from existential

choice and moral reflection. In Beauvoir's existentialist view, ethical action arises from authenticity and freedom, not conformity. When combined with the ethics of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, this perspective positions *dharma* as a moral journey shaped by context, empathy and self-determination than mere social prescription.

Philosophically, feminist dharma represents a synthesis of three interrelated dimensions: (1) Metaphysical, in which *dharma* is seen as the sustaining moral order of life; (2) *Ethical*, where it becomes a principle of care, autonomy, and justice; and (3) *Practical*, where it guides action within concrete social realities. By merging these dimensions, feminist *dharma* transcends both moral relativism and dogmatic traditionalism. This reconstruction also embodies what Uma Chakravarti calls the politics of retrieval—the act of recovering liberatory elements from within oppressive traditions. Feminist *dharma*, thus, is a hermeneutic and transformative project—reading the past critically to imagine an equitable future.

Contemporary Relevance: Dharma, Gender and Moral Agency in Modern India

In contemporary India, the discourse of *dharma* continues to shape ethical, social and political life. The persistent gender inequality, despite constitutional promises of gender equality, reveals the enduring power of patriarchy disguised as religious duty. Feminist philosophy exposes how such expectations transform moral obedience and responsibility into moral subservience. By contrast, a reconstructed feministic *dhārmic* ethics redefines moral agency in terms of self-reflection and context-sensitivity.

Contemporary Indian thinkers and activists have increasingly drawn upon this reinterpretitive potential. Indian philosophers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Swami Vivekananda reveal strikingly similar vision in their moral vision with the feminist thinkers. Although these thinkers did not explicitly frame their philosophy within the frame of feminist philosophy; however, rising from distinct sociocultural contexts, both traditions agree on the idea that morality must emerge from conscious, compassionate engagement with life and not just passive obedience.

For Gandhi, *dharma* is equivalent to *ahimsā*, nonviolence and empathy in thought, word and action. Similar to Noddings', Gandhi's notion of *dharma* lies in compassion, self-reflection and relational responsibility. His critique of untouchability and patriarchal customs reflects a deep feminist understanding, that moral law must serve justice and equality, not hierarchy. In Gandhi's moral universe, the worth of an action is in its intention to alleviate suffering, an ethical insight that aligns with Nodding's "caring as response" (Noddings, 1984) and Gilligan's subjective moral reasoning.

Gandhi's repeated critique of untouchability, child marriage, and the marginalization of women demonstrates his conviction that no social practice can claim moral legitimacy merely on the ground of tradition. From a feministic standpoint, Gandhi's emphasis on conscience over custom redefines *dharma* as ethical praxis, rather than social obedience.

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan also described *dharma* as a "living and growing body of moral consciousness" (Radhakrishnan, 1927) rejecting its ties to rituals and customs. By explicitly rejecting static interpretations of religious morality, Radhakrishnan provides a theoretical foundation for feminist reinterpretations of *dharma*. He argued that moral ideals must evolve alongside human consciousness and social conditions, thereby challenging the legitimacy of ancient prescriptions that no longer serve justice or human dignity. From a feminist perspective, Radhakrishnan's view undermines the authority of patriarchal texts that present women's subordination as eternal or divinely sanctioned. His view, rooted in reason, compassion and spiritual freedom, aligns with Gilligan's emphasis on moral maturity as relational understanding, as he saw *dharma* as the evolution of human spirit towards truth and unity. From feminist standpoint, this opens space for reinterpreting *dharma* as inclusive and evolving, capable of responding to the moral insights of women and other marginalized voices historically excluded.

Similarly, Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation of *dharma* as service to humanity offers perhaps the most explicit challenge to hierarchical morality. His assertion of *dharma* as the realization of one's highest potential through service to humanity shifts the moral center of *dharma* away from ritual, caste, and gender prescriptions. By grounding *dharma* in human dignity, Vivekananda implicitly rejects moral systems that legitimize inequality in the name of tradition. Feminist philosophy finds strong resonance here. His insistence that "there is no religion higher than human welfare" (Vivekananda, 1970) resonates with both Beauvoir's call for authenticity and Noddings' ethics of care. In Vivekananda's reimagination, *dharma* becomes creative expression of self-realization and compassion, an interpretation capable of being united with feminist ethics. Moreover, his emphasis on education and empowerment, especially of women, supports a feminist vision of *dharma* as enabling moral self-realization rather than enforcing subservience.

Other contemporary Indian thinkers and activists have also participated in this reclamation journey of dharma. In Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Buddhist humanism, redefinition of *dhamma* as liberty, equality, and fraternity provides a crucial philosophical foundation for a feminist ethics that is both inclusive and emancipatory. By rejecting the rigid hierarchies of Brahmanical morality, Ambedkar reframed moral law as a principle of social transformation. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism similarly

extends the idea of *dharma* to the environmental sphere, framing care for the mother earth as both spiritual and ethical responsibility.

In contemporary society, such a reimagining has profound implications. It offers a moral vocabulary that is culturally rooted yet philosophically progressive, enabling dialogue between Indian ethics and global feminist thought. By redefining *dharma* as a dynamic process of moral becoming, feminist philosophy restores to it the vitality it once possessed, a guiding force for social justice, human dignity, and the flourishing of all forms of life. A feminist reconstruction of *dharma* invites Indian philosophy to return to its ethical heart while expanding it to meet the moral challenges of modernity. It envisions an ethical world where moral duty arises not from hierarchy but from empathy, not from command but from conscience. By integrating care, justice, and autonomy, feminist *dharma* offers a philosophy of liberation rooted in India's own intellectual and spiritual soil, a vision of ethics both ancient in wisdom and radical in its contemporary promise.

Conclusion:

Revisiting *dharma* through a feminist philosophical perspective allows us to recover its original ethical vitality while challenging the patriarchal distortions that have shaped its interpretation over centuries. In early Indian philosophy, *dharma* represented the sustaining moral law that unified the cosmic, social, and individual orders. Yet, through the historical consolidation of Brahmanical patriarchy, this dynamic moral ideal became institutionalized as a set of gendered duties that constrained women's autonomy and moral agency. Understanding *dharma* as a living and evolving moral consciousness, as articulated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, offers a framework to reinterpret it as inclusive, relational, and responsive to human welfare. This reinterpretation finds strong resonance in Carol Gilligan's and Nel Noddings 'feminist ethics of care, which shift moral discourse from abstract universalism to the lived realities of empathy, responsibility, and interdependence. Their emphasis on relational morality parallels the early spiritual vision of *dharma* as a principle rooted in compassion and reciprocity rather than rigid duty. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir's conception of gender as socially constructed unravels how patriarchal societies naturalized inequality through selective readings of *dharma*, presenting women's subordination as divinely ordained rather than socially produced. A feminist reconstruction of *dharma*, therefore, does not seek to discard the tradition but to reclaim its transformative moral essence. By aligning *dharma* with feminist ethics, contemporary Indian philosophy can reaffirm it as a guiding principle that upholds equality, autonomy, and justice. In a time when moral, religious, and gendered discourses often conflict, this

reinterpretation of *dharma* points toward an ethical vision that is inclusive, dynamic, and grounded in human flourishing—fulfilling Vivekananda's ideal that there is no religion higher than human welfare.

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