



## **Contextualising *Dharma*: A Critical Study of Bimal Krishna Matilal**

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### **Abstract:**

The writings of Bimal Krishna Matilal offer a significant account of *dharma* by foregrounding its role at the intersection of rational and epistemological inquiry in Indian philosophy. Matilal's central concern is to show that Indian tradition does not rely solely on prescribed rules; instead, it is tied to the situation and its contingencies. Hence, it must be recognised through reason. This paper presents a critical analysis of Matilal's essays to highlight the responsible grounds of *dharma* and its ethical justification. By exploring such deliberate, contextual, and analytical insights, this study offers a theoretically grounded evaluation. It uplifts the reconfiguration of *dharma* as a relevant idea. This particular concern is marked by a tension between ethical prospects and rational grounds. In this sense, Matilal's contribution also helps to build a bridge between Indian classical theories and contemporary rational discourses.

**Keywords:** Classical Inquiry, *Dharma*, Dilemma, Epistemology, Indian Philosophy, Rationality.

**Introduction:**

In the Indian philosophical context, the principle of *dharma* occupies a central position. However, apart from its centrality, *dharma* is marked by philosophical ambiguities, instabilities, and often oscillates between contextual understanding and prescribed norms. *Dharma* has traditionally been understood as a set of obligations, embodied in Indian classical scriptures such as the *Dharmasastras* and *Nyaya* or *Mimamsa* philosophy. It is even configured in layered historical narratives such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These narratives describe *dharma* as the cornerstone of moral conduct, human behaviour, and ethical duties. Though the classical Indian tradition does not situate *dharma* within a mere set of rules. Rather, it presents *dharma* as inherent and contextual, which is often marked by ambiguities. In his analytical essays, Bimal Krishna Matilal anticipates the tension between the typical course of action and their contingencies, foregrounding a critical reconfiguration of *dharma*. Matilal's writings attempt to present *dharma* not as a mere religious storehouse but as a rational, contextual practice that aids ethical and moral deliberations. Though Matilal's projection is significant within broader analytical discourses, his synthesis also requires scrutiny, critical examination, and philosophical coherence. Contemporary philosophers like Jonardon Ganeri also attempt to interpret Indian tradition through these analytical frameworks. Ganeri provides intellectual insights to understand how conceptual categories also require rigorous scrutiny and a mode of inquiry.

Matilal attempts to situate classical Indian thought within contemporary discussions of duty, ethics, and moral philosophy. He argues that *dharma* should be identified under the categories of rational validation, critical confirmation, scrutiny, and possible inferential deliberations. In this regard, the actions of the moral agents should not be justified under the lens of scriptural tradition but through critical understanding. It makes *dharma* a living analytical framework. Focusing on the essays of Matilal, such as "Elusiveness and Ambiguity in *Dharma*-Ethics",

“*Dharma* and Rationality”, and “Rationality, *Dharma* and the *Pramana* Theory” – this paper argues epistemological dimensions of Indian thought, exploring how situational contingencies are the inherent features of *dharma*. It also foregrounds how Matilal reconceptualises broader analytical implications of *dharma*, particularly its reliance on an ethical and rational framework. Though he analyses *dharma* from a contextual background, his interpretation is still tension-ridden. Therefore, by exploring these grounds of moral concerns and ethical justifications, this study tends to move beyond descriptive engagement and develop Matilal’s philosophical coherence and theoretical projections, especially in contemporary discussions.

### **Literature Review:**

In Indian as well as Western philosophy, scholars consciously engage in conceptualising *dharma* and its various dimensions. Indian thinkers such as Vachaspati Mishra or Dharmakirti address *dharma* through the lens of moral duties and responsibilities. In *A History of Indian Philosophy* (1922-55), S.N. Dasgupta situates Indian philosophical tradition within a historical framework where *dharma* functions as ritualistic and scriptural practices. Matilal, in his writings, seeks to articulate the core concept of *dharma*, transitioning towards a more philosophically and rationally accepted reflection. Similarly, Chandradhar Sharma in *Indian Philosophy: A Critical Survey* (1960) foregrounds a critical evaluation of various Indian schools of thought. Though his frameworks do not directly address the epistemological configurations of moral nature, they still help to contextualise a comparative study of *dharma*. It becomes a relevant concern to understand the historical narratives and their rational deliberations.

In *Dharma Tatva* (1888), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay rejects blind adherence to scriptures and redefines *dharma*. He argues that *dharma* should be interpreted with rationality and for the well-being of people. He also exemplifies how situational contingencies remain a significant

concern in relocating the idea of *dharma*. Bankim's objective is to free *dharma* from the shackles of oriental constructions of thought that remain influential in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal. In this regard, Matilal foregrounds his analytical theories to situate *dharma* within the world's discussions. He upholds the concepts of rationality within contemporary Indian philosophical discourses. Bankim's *dharma* is shaped by socio-political concerns, while Matilal's approach is more philosophically rigorous.

In the translated versions of the *Bhagavad Gita* (2019), the *Ramayana* (2017), and the *Mahabharata* (2015), Bibek Debroy provides a contemporary re-reading of historical narratives with greater clarity and philosophical inquiry. His writings elucidate such dynamics where *dharma* is performed more contextually. In this context, Matilal proposes an additional intervention. He questions the narratives and their ethical dimensions. Though Debroy deals with the possible textual extractions, Matilal, on the other hand, analyses those terrains through his philosophical mode of inquiry.

Matilal himself attacks the Western thought which portrays that Indian knowledge system always lacks in reasoning. He interprets *dharma* as a morally justifiable action. In *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (1986), Matilal epistemologically and methodologically provides the outline of ethical investigations with various Indian theories of knowledge (*Pramana*). His efforts, therefore, reconfigured *dharma* within philosophical and analytical discourses. It further makes a significant and critical breakthrough from the traditional viewpoints.

In *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Bertrand Russell foregrounds the idea of logical analysis as a means of understanding philosophy. Although his writings do not connect *dharma* directly, his frameworks become essential to conceptualise Matilal's assertive grounds on Indian classical philosophy and historical thought. The works of Matilal show that Indian

philosophy can reach a height of critical hermeneutics to redefine *dharma*. Additionally, he also brings light to conceptualise moral dilemmas at the intersection of analytical grounds, ethical duties, and rational deliberations.

However, in the context of Indian traditions, recent analytical frameworks, especially examined by scholars such as Jonardon Ganeri, have become influential. Ganeri in *Philosophy in Classical India* (2001) situates Matilal within the broader Indian philosophical and analytical trajectories. At the same time, J.N. Mohanty in *Classical Indian Philosophy* (2002) provides a phenomenological and contextual angle to study Indian philosophy, which often complicates the rational viewpoint. Though critics often acknowledge Matilal's contribution to intellectual traditions, they sometimes argue that this synthesis leaves tension between universal rationality and contextual grounds. This study, therefore, builds upon such arguments and addresses such tension-ridden gaps that closely examine Matilal's understanding, his philosophy, with certain additional analytical frameworks.

### **Methodology:**

The study adopts an analytical and critical hermeneutic approach that combines philosophical argumentation with textual analysis. Though the primary focus remains on Matilal's essays, the paper also situates his arguments within broader analytical, comparative, and philosophical discourses. Moreover, Indian epistemological insights are studied to examine the foundations of *dharma*. These frameworks help the study to move beyond descriptive arguments and toward a rigorous philosophical analysis of Matilal's contribution to understanding *dharma*.

### **Analysis and Discussion:**

#### **I. Elusiveness and Ambiguity in *Dharma*-Ethics:**

B.K. Matilal's essay "Elusiveness and Ambiguity in *Dharma*-Ethics" attempts to conceptualise the philosophical and contextual configurations of *dharma* by challenging the mystical

interpretations of Indian ethical thought. Matilal demonstrates that ambiguities within *dharma* (along with related concepts such as *artha*, *karma*, *duhkha*, *kāvya*, and *rasa*) are central to its cultural contexts. P.V. Kane in *History of Dharmasāstra* (1930) remarks, “*Dharma* is one of those Sanskrit words that defy all attempts at an exact rendering in English or any other tongue” (Kane 1), focusing on the push-and-pull of history. The root word of *dharma* is *dhr*, which etymologically means something ‘to uphold’ or ‘to sustain’. In the *Rig Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, *dharma* is described as a merit, earned through ritualistic practices. On the other hand, the *Chandogya Upanishad* (2.23.1) explains three forms of the same – *adhyayana* (study), *tapas* (austerities), and *yajna* (rituals). Apart from the etymological meaning of the term ‘dharma’, its significance comes into being only within the domain of practices.

It is often assumed that Indian ethics follow a ritualistic, religious, and universal pattern. Philosophers like Manu and Prasastapada propose the idea of *sādhāraṇa-dharma* (universal duties). Dumont’s view on hierarchy and Weber’s rational interpretation of *dharma* is generally used to explain these principles. Matilal challenges both these standpoints and argues that universal patterns are responsible to generate dilemmas. These complexities are described in the historical narratives such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, where moral deliberations are mostly contextual. Historical narratives often exemplify the nature of *dharma* along with its intricacies. In the *Mahabharata*, *dharma* is personified in various forms. For instance, in the Yaksha episode, Yudhishthira answers Yaksha’s questions in this way: “The scriptures are many and are divided; the *dharmasāstras* are many and different. Nobody is called a sage until and unless he holds a different view. The truth of *dharma* lies concealed in the dark cave of the human heart. Therefore, the way to *dharma* is the one that is taken by *mahājana* (great persons or exemplary agents)” (Matilal 40-41). This Yaksha episode elucidates how a king navigates failures and uncertainties. It also unfolds that moral duties sometimes go beyond human control, but at the same time require judgment. This idea

reiterates Ganeri's interpretative dimensions of openness and narrative plurality. However, such openness raises significant concerns about the stability of evaluation. Through these illustrations, the argument contends how these narratives are not mere stories but a strong medium through which ethical dimensions gradually reflect and contextually unfold.

Robert Lingat foregrounds the fact that *dharma* is something which is not imposed but proposed. He claims that the classical Indian tradition is a place of interpretations rather than any rigid adherences. The ethics of *dharma* proposes diversity, but it also acknowledges tension and complexities. The actions of Rama from the *Ramayana* or Krishna from the *Mahabharata* are always under reinterpretation and scrutiny. Figures like Tulsidas, Kalidasa, Krittibas, Bhasa, and Bhavabhuti explain how such narratives always show struggles on the moral questions of action. The killing of Valin from behind is criticised as an unethical act. Question begins when Valin's concern is shown with the fairness of the action. Such reconceptualisations explain how Indian tradition justifies action and acknowledges ambiguities. Though Matilal foregrounds ambiguity as a significant feature of *dharma*, he does not fully provide insights into how moral accountability can be maintained within these frameworks.

Another significant episode in the *Mahabharata* is Yudhisthira's utterance of a half-truth to kill Dronacharya on the battlefield. However, it is encouraged by Krishna, it is not fully justified in the tradition. Arjuna criticises Yudhisthira for exercising this. Therefore, these instances embody the tension between the demands of *dharma* on one hand and the conflicting nature of human action on the other. Though regarding *dharma*, Rama's vision is indomitable, while Krishna's vision is contextual. Rather than absolute ideas, the understanding of Krishna is largely based on the well-being of human life within an imperfect world. Matilal, therefore, argues that ambiguities are the inevitable elements of life. In terms of historical narratives, *dharma* does not uphold fixed behaviours, it should be placed in an evolving sphere of contextual necessity. Therefore, Matilal's argument lies in recognising the ambiguities and

complexities. However, its limitation lies in the absence of a mechanism that resolves moral indeterminacy.

## II. *Dharma* and Rationality:

To discuss rationality, in another essay, “*Dharma* and Rationality”, Matilal narrates a rural Bengali tale where every individual acts in their own way (free-rider). As a result, the outcome undermines collective interest. Matilal uses this context to describe the fundamental approach to rationality. In the story, every person tries to think in a similar way, which leads to an irrational outcome. Therefore, the process of universalisation hampers the intended conclusion. This rural tale illustrates the interconnectedness of rationality and morality, where any moral step or action should be followed by a rational behaviour for collective well-being. This point argues that rational behavioural models often overlook addressing collective ethical responsibilities. Matilal does not conceptualise *dharma* as a duty that should be religiously followed, but rather as an ethical virtue that is largely contextual and inherent to the rich Indian traditional and cultural wisdom. He characterises the process of ‘free-riding’ as *a-dharma* (violating the moral order). To support this broader understanding and to produce a comprehensive framework, Matilal refers to the discussions on *dharma*, which are largely found in the historical narratives – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The purpose of referring to Indian narratives is to underscore the idea that *dharma* should be grounded in a rational and informed action.

In Indian philosophical discourse, the concept of *dharma* has always been a subject of debate. It was never completely based on the authority of God (for instance, the *Mimāmsā* school of thought). This critical inquiry is also justified to interpret the doctrine of *karma*, providing a rational explanation to balance normative principles. To illustrate the rational dynamics of *dharma*, Matilal refers to the story of Satyakāma in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Satyakāma was

unaware of his lineage, but his honesty and courage compel the sage Gautama to recognise that he belongs to the Brahmins. Though this example raises questions about the criteria through which ethical worth is validated. Similarly, in the *Vanaparva* of the *Mahabharata*, Yudhiṣṭhira states that the qualification of being a Brahmin is based on the virtues, rather than birth history. These instances indicate that the nature of *dharma* is based on moral deliberations rather than any societal position.

In the Indian context, *dharma* is not associated with God; rather, it is justified by sound judgement. In the *Mānava-dharmasāstra*, *dharma* is defined as something which "...is always honoured by the honest and the wise... and approved by their hearts" (Matilal 54-55). This definition aligns action with rational behaviour and stresses the fact that ethical thought is based on human understanding. Matilal makes a remark on the reference of 'heart' (referring to Medhātithi and Kullūka's interpretation of heart as *hrdaya* for moral consideration) that becomes significant for the agent to determine *dharma*. Dilemmas that become a great concern in the *Mahabharata* also involve such moments where rational deliberations seem to be satisfactory from both sides. In such situations, action must be based on a fair moral conscience to ensure the approval of the heart. Therefore, Indian tradition acknowledges multiple dimensions of *dharma* beyond the scriptures. When dilemmas cannot determine a solution, the agent's moral aspects surface to serve a decisive guidance. In *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalā*, Kālidāsa remarks, "...in matters where doubt intervenes, the natural inclination of the heart of the good person becomes the *pramāṇa*" (Matilal 57-58), indicating the nature of conscience and judgmental abilities in Indian ethical thought. The idea regarding the conscience here complicates rigid logical frameworks; rather, it posits a subjective viewpoint into moral reasoning. As Mohanty also foregrounds, moral judgment cannot be based on rational deliberations only, it should incorporate experiential dimensions.

*Dharma* in Indian philosophy is not all about blind faith; rather, it is an integration of moral and reasoned deliberations. The *Mīmāṃsā* school of thought posits the Vedas to rigorous rational scrutiny. Even Manu asserts that reasoning should have the power of justification. According to the *Mānava-dharmasāstra*, conflicts regarding *dharma* must be resolved by using *pramanas* such as inference, perception, and verbal testimony. Dilemmas regarding *dharma*, termed as *dharma-saṃkṛāṭa*, *dharma-vikalpa*, and *kimkartavya-vimūḍhatā*, always foreground a logical thought progression. One might be referred to as a weakness of the will as described in verses,

“jānāmi dharmam na ca me pravṛttiḥ / jānāmi adharmam na ca me nivṛttiḥ” —  
 “I know what is *dharma*, but I cannot persuade myself to act accordingly; I know what is *adharmam*, but I cannot refrain from it” (Matilal 60-62). These instances are well depicted in the *Mahabharata*. For instance, despite the consequences, the urge of Yudhisthira to gamble and Dhritarashtra’s limitless affection towards Duryodhana prevent these figures from acting against injustice. These incidents highlight the fact that moral knowledge does not always uphold correct action. Indian schools of thought posit the weakness of the will as an aspect of human nature that can be resolved through moral efforts.

Matilal remarks that true dilemmas are not similar to moral weakness. They occur when ethical considerations from both sides require incongruous actions. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna is caught similarly between familial obligations and his duties as a kshatriya. Yudhisthira on the battlefield is also stuck between strategic movement and being truthful. In regard to these situations, ethical tension cannot be eradicated by rational deliberations; rather, decisions are based on consequences. While placed in such dilemmas, agents usually feel remorseful and guilty. Matilal describes that this guilt feeling is responsible for violating the right course of action. Figures such as Yudhisthira and Arjuna expose this tension between emotional appeal and rational justifications.

*Dharma* in the *Mahabharata* is described within the frameworks of complex moral realities and situational contingencies. Although rational deliberations can be a way of making a moral choice, they cannot discard conflicts. Ethical gestures need practical wisdom so that they can formulate necessary duties along with recognising moral regrets. Therefore, in the context of the Indian philosophical lens and for Matilal as well, *dharma* is certainly interpretative and situational. It guides both society and individual action with the help of immense wisdom. The historical narratives unfold these ethical insights, which not only interpret classical Indian tradition but also influence present-day philosophical discussions.

### **III. Rationality, *Dharma*, and the *Pramāṇa* Theory:**

B. K. Matilal does not provide a fixed definition of rationality, unlike dominant Western formulations. By challenging their exclusive cultural frameworks, Matilal argues that rational understanding has never been conceptualised in terms of consistent judgement and foresight. Such assertions are not only the defining factor of Western thought but, to some extent, also deeply enshrined in Indian intellectual tradition. Therefore, in his essay “Rationality, *Dharma*, and the *Pramāṇa* Theory,” Matilal foregrounds how *dharma* and rationality are interconnected. Moreover, in terms of classical Indian philosophy, it demonstrates that ethical reasoning is grounded in contextual insights. It exemplifies four expressions of rationality – firstly, maximising the outcome through rational thought, secondly, avoiding contradictions, thirdly, acknowledging human equalities, and fourthly, the deductive power of reasoning. Apart from the fourth one (formal deductive method), the first three expressions are generally found in the Indian philosophical tradition.

The contemporary idea of rationality presents its limitations when practicality is restricted by the lack of sufficient information. Buridan’s *Sophistimata* suggests that a rational agent is unable to make a decision when the alternative options are perfectly balanced, and hence leads

to inaction. In such cases, decisions cannot be made on purely rational grounds; rather, they also need certain acknowledgements that are less than perfect resolutions. In Indian philosophical tradition, *yukti* (reason) is supposed to be used in deliberation, but should be placed in such situations to compete with alternative options. The limitations regarding logic present broader philosophical criticism that claims its ability to resolve ambiguities. It suggests that rationality sometimes remains insufficient to make moral decisions. For instance, in the *Gita*, Arjuna portrays that the ethics of *dharma* should be based on rational deliberations rather than any blind adherence. At the battlefield, Arjuna faces unresolvable moral conflicts, such as being a *kshatriya*, how can he fight against his grandfather (Bhisma), his kingdom, and his close relatives? The arguments from both sides (one that Arjuna has to fight and the other one is how he will fight against his family) seem to be in balance and thus place him in a rationally undecidable situation. Matilal refers to it as *dharma-sammūḍha-cetāḥ* (“with mind perplexed about *dharma*”) (II.7). However, rather than weakness to be very precise, Arjuna’s dilemma presents his logical reflection: “I would rather be a monk and earn my livelihood by begging, and not kill these honourable elders, than enjoy wealth... soaked in blood” (II.5). This analysis claims a counter action against the depiction that Indian ethics are merely irrational. In this context, *dharma* is placed on a ground of debate. This projection of a rational mode of conduct is based on moral virtues through which Matilal argues the dynamics of *dharma* in action. Dilemmas also help to understand the limits of rationality when it confronts the lived moral conflicts and uncertainties.

Matilal, moreover, illustrates that criticisms regarding the ethics of *dharma* did not wait for a contemporary enlightenment, but it has always been a continuous feature of the tradition itself. Even Rama and Krishna are not exempt from criticism. Max Weber himself elaborates *karma* as “...the most consistent theodicy ever produced in history and a product of rational ethical thought” (Matilal 74-75). The significant idea lies in the fact that both the historical narratives

and their reinterpretations regarding the *karma* dynamics expose a long-standing rational endeavour within the tradition of *dharma*. By foregrounding these frameworks, Matilal counters those predicaments that claim Indian ethical tradition to be irrational.

In regard to the classical tradition, the conscience of morality is regarded as a significant guiding factor. Matilal refers to *Manu Samhitā* (II.1; II.6; II.12) and asserts that *dharma* is something which is performed by those people who are always free from any kind of attachments. By citing Garga, the commentator Kullūka remarks, “Satisfaction of the conscience is the only authority in cases of (unresolvable) conflicting alternatives” (Matilal 76-77). This transition from head to heart is not against rationality, but rather an immense acknowledgement of such dilemmas that seem to be irresolvable. Figures like Cārvāka also employ *hetu-śāstra* (Vedic authority and its independent reasoning) to critique the scriptural notion of *dharma*. The reasoning in Matilal’s understanding depends on a balance between moral justification and logical viewpoint. Therefore, Indian ethical thought process culminates in conscience and reasoning. It foregrounds the idea that when reasoning is restricted within its limitations, the rational way of deliberations aligns with moral intuitions.

While addressing the rational form of *dharma* and its ethical nature, Matilal gives two opposite instances. In the *Ramayana*, the sage Jabali advises Rama to avoid exile. The purpose of life stands for pleasure and institutions like family are a part of social structures, and therefore always revisable. On the other hand, Manu’s *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* rearticulates a rational ground to *dharma* as he remarks that controversies must be resolved through an assembly (preferably with ten or at least three Vedic scholars – a semanticist, a dialectician, and a logician). To purify the ethical standpoint of *dharma*, it also addresses to three prominent *pramānas*, such as perception, inference, and scripture. Philosophers from classical Indian philosophy always require an empirical and epistemic ground for the accepted means of

knowledge, turning an assumption into a fact (for instance, Vātsyāyana). However, conclusions should be observed continuously, as it is crucial when considering human errors.

Additionally, in the context of rational acceptability, Matilal also clarifies that the doctrine of *nyāya* is supposed to posit a conclusion that should not contradict the facts. Reason should always produce leading inferences. Basically, it argues two key elements – one is evidential inferences, and the other is the consistent nature of accepted facts. Through these frameworks, Matilal attempts to focus on approaching *dharma* where the agents should evaluate duties through situational contingencies (for instance, the *Gita*, and its emphasis on one's *svadharma*). He uplifts the original essence of the textual and philosophical tradition of classical India within the contemporary domain of thought.

### **Conclusion:**

The essays of Matilal provide a critical, rigorous, and contextual understanding of *dharma*. It challenges Western interpretations that often locate Indian ethos in a rigid and mystical tradition. Through his writings, Matilal elucidates that *dharma* is neither fixed nor universal but is always rationally justifiable and flexible. He reposit *dharma* within an analytical framework that reveals an unresolved tension between ethical deliberation and rational justification. As Austin B. Creel in his essay “The Reexamination of ‘*Dharma*’ in Hindu Ethics” (1975) asserts, “*Dharma* pointed to duty, and specified duties; *dharma* also supplied a rationale or justification for duties by reference to patterns of order understood to be regnant in society and in the cosmos” (Creel 161). Matilal's frameworks argue the structure of the classical texts where *dharma* is often found in the relations between reasoning, scripture (*sastra*), and valid means of knowledge (*pramanas*).

Moreover, Matilal's works formulate a connection between classical Indian philosophy and contemporary analytical discourses. Ganeri additionally notes that Matilal's viewpoint posits

both advancement and philosophical tension. In the context of *dharma*, sometimes it provides ethical and rational guidance to act, and sometimes captures human beings and their experiences within situational contingencies. These understandings altogether place Indian philosophy as an interlocutor of contemporary discussion and a locus of historical consciousness. Matilal's arguments not only articulate the mere study of *dharma* and its dynamics but also provide timeless, enduring knowledge within the contemporary Indian philosophical debate. Matilal's works help to reflect on the moral complexities where ambiguity and uncertainty are unavoidable. Such works also contribute not only to redefine *dharma* but also to exposing the challenges embedded in moral reasoning itself.

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