

Interdisciplinarization and Internationalization of Western Academy: A Case Study from India

Even though the Chinese concept Dao and Indian concept Dharma¹ are different from the Western notions of 'Philosophy' or 'Religion', most studies of non-Western cultures that are conducted in the Western academy today are done with the Western hermeneutic framework based on 'Philosophy' and 'Religion' as if both are globally applicable categories of knowledge. Consequently, the Western theory and method to study the non-Western cultures and traditions is contributing to more global problems than solutions. For instance, Western style secularism, based on the notion of 'Religion', was imported to India and gave rise to Hindu nationalism (Roover 2002 and Balagangadhara 1994, 2005). Similarly, Western style environmentalist practice of creating National Parks, based on the dichotomy of humans and nature, has been criticized in the "third-world" context where natural resources abound with dense human populations (Guha 1999). Despite this incompatibility of Western theory and method in the context of non-Western cultures, there is little that has changed in the Western academy over the years. Even today, most humanities, social sciences, and other departments do not include non-Western theories of knowledge. For instance, only a couple of universities offer courses in Indian Philosophy or Indian Classics and even those are largely limited to the departments of religious studies, as if non-Western philosophies and classics are not to compete with mainstream philosophies and classics². Similarly, Indian theories of psychology, linguistics, aesthetics, politics, health and medicine, architecture, mathematics, and music are largely ignored.

In this paper, I argue that the Western academy should include non-Western knowledge traditions not just to study them as an exotic 'other' but also to globalize the hermeneutical framework to study the non-Western cultures. This internationalization can enrich the study and application of Interdisciplinarity because unlike the dichotomy of Jerusalem (Religion) and Athens (Philosophy) in the West, non-Western cultures have always been interdisciplinary. I present my case study of an Indic global community called Swadhyaya, which I studied and interpreted without applying the Western categories of 'religion', 'environmental ethics', and 'ecology', but with the Indic framework based on 'dharma' whose meanings include religion, ethics, virtue, ecology, sustainability, and law. Thus, by definition, dharma incorporates several interdisciplinary strands in its fold. This is also intended as a case study in 'field philosophy' conducted in India and in the Indian Diaspora in the USA.

Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli suggest that since the religions tend to separate sacred from profane, they cannot present a comprehensive framework that can inspire the local level collective initiatives that can assume the moral responsibilities for the social and ecological justice. I agree that if we view "Hinduism" from the lens of

¹ See, "On Dharma and Li", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (April 1972)

² <http://www.h-net.org/~buddhism/GradStudies.htm>

“religion”, we might see a divide between sacred and profane. However, most Asian traditions such as Shintoism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Hinduism, lack the theological and organizational foundations of Western religions (Sanford 2007). Alternatively, I suggest that the Indic traditions should be interpreted using the notion of *dharma*.

Although Indian vernacular dictionaries have accepted *dharma* as the Indic equivalent vernacular term for religious traditions, Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary gives at least seventeen meanings including religion, customary observances, law usage, practice, religious or moral merit, virtue, righteousness, duty, justice, piety, morality, and sacrifice (Narayanan 2001). As Arnold Kunst notes, *dharma* remains as the intrinsic nature of beings, motivating their conduct (1978). Timothy Fitzgerald also notes (2005), “*Dharma* corresponds more closely to a notion of cosmic, social, and ritual order. If we were looking for the fundamental principle or value to provide an entry into the vast complexity of Hindu civilization, the concept of *dharma* might be a good place to start.”

While *dharma* is often translated as “religion”, its usage related to virtues, righteousness, and cosmic law and order, can play an important role as argued by Arati Dhand (2002). From several examples from the Indian epics, she shows that *dharma* in the lives of epic characters exemplifies its universal ethical appeal:

“*Dharma* is that which strives for the benefit of creatures; *dharma* is so called because it is wedded to nonviolence...*Dharma* is friendliness that [works for] the welfare of all...*Dharma* is so called because it supports [beings]. People are supported by *dharma*. Because it is attached to the support [of beings], it is called *dharma*. One, whose life is the practice of *dharma*, embraces non-injurious conduct. *Dharma*...[is about] nine ideals that all human beings must practice: the restraint of anger, truthfulness of speech, an agreeable nature, forgiveness, begetting children upon one’s own wives, purity of conduct, avoidance of quarrel, simplicity, and the maintenance of dependents”.

She concludes:

“[I]f there is one ethic informing all actions, it is a willingness to bear all hardship for an uncompromising commitment to *dharma*. Doing one’s duty means holding one’s own interests in the lowest regard, and exerting oneself for the well-being of the family with an attitude of ascetic equanimity, within the vigilant constraints of a *dharma* that is defined not simply socially, but ethically. In the reverse of what one is conditioned to do in ordinary Western-style modern life, where one places high importance on individualistic goals, according to the ideals of Ramayana, one should sacrifice one’s own interests for the sake of one’s nuclear family. One should sacrifice the interests of one’s nuclear family for the sake of a more extended notion of family. Finally, one should sacrifice the interest of all narrow notions of family for the sake of broader notions of family, for *dharma*.”

Dharma, then, should be the ultimate focus of one's actions, and its playground is *loka*, 'the world'. Hinduism, then, does have embedded in its social psychology a universal ethics whose primary frame of reference is worldly, not soteriological, and which can become the basis for social activism."

Similarly, Anne Feldhaus (1995:102) notes from several Sanskrit sources that the forest is associated with dharma, the social and moral order that is supposed to rule life in the village, the city, and the kingdom. Dharma transcends the boundaries of religion, as exemplified by the Hindu epic characters, and is not limited to matters of soteriology and rituals. Dharma in Hindu epics comes closer to the category of ethics, morality, and duties. Thus, I suggest that these ethical interpretations can become the basis for activism in general and for ecology in particular. Ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos*, or home, works well with the family paradigm of Indian ethics as Dhand shows above.

Thus I suggest that Indic traditions based on the concept of dharma incorporate duties, virtues, ethics, and spirituality simultaneously. Following above examples, I would like to note that the influence of Indian epics such as the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahabharata, and the Purāṇas is widespread in India, both in the rural parts of the North India and the South India. As Dhand shows, the characters of these epics, especially the heroes, who sacrifice their personal interests to serve and protect the ideals of dharma, exemplify the idea of dharma. Moreover, the sojourn of the epic heroes into the forest is called "the seed of dharma" in folklore because forest acts as a place of testing and their period of forest exile are seen as a kind of initiation prior to their assumption of rule.

In addition, the Mahabharata defines dharma, as one that *sustains* both the personal order and the cosmic order. Hindus, in their daily lives, use dharma interchangeably to describe their ethos as it relates to their religion and natural order. Especially, for the rural Hindus the distinction between the religious ethos and the ecological order is negligible since they describe them with the common term dharma or *dharam*. Several scholars have noted this trend in Hindus. Ann Gold's observations from her fieldwork in Rajasthan are especially helpful. She describes the villagers who relate their moral actions with the ecological outcomes (2002). Frederick Smith records similar trends in ethnosociology of Marriott and Inden (2006: 586). Smith also cites Arjun Appadurai, "South Asians do not separate the moral from natural order, act from actor, person from collectivity, and everyday life from the realm of the transcendent." Smith concludes, "The distinction between mind and body, humanity and nature, essence, idea, quality, and deity, would be (largely) one of degree rather than of kind."

Thus, morality and natural phenomena are connected and interdependent. This organizing principle also matches with Edgerton's notion of the "dominant idea" in a people's culture (1942). Dharma occurs, in identical or semantically equivalent

forms, frequently in Indian texts. Both the authors of these texts and the lay Indian society regard it as an important notion for its bearing on human life and conduct. My research suggests that dharma appears with a high degree of frequency in the texts and daily conversation of Hindus as an explanatory principle and that the people's behavior conforms to their professed beliefs. Therefore, agreeing with Grant McCall (1982), I suggest that dharma can be elevated from a folk or Brahminical notion to an analytical level, especially as it pertains to both the religious and ecological "attitudes" of Hindus (Potter 1991). Like any other society, Hindus of different backgrounds such as different languages, castes, and regions, subscribe to a concept of order as the most desirable end, with each group (and each person in that group) holding a unique understanding of what constituted that overall orientation. Thus, individuals interpret and apply dharma in their own situations freely even though there are overarching generic laws and norms laid down by the Indic traditions based on dharma. While above references suggest that Dharma can evolve towards developing environmental ethics, I now turn to some of the challenges and problems in this regard.

Weightman and Pandey (1978), two Hindi lecturers in London analyzed hundreds of Hindi sentences and found that the word dharma in everyday language of North Hindus chiefly signifies three things: religion, duty, and intrinsic property. In my fieldwork, In addition to these meanings, I also saw that the third meaning of intrinsic property or attribute of an inanimate object was also assigned to the cosmic entities such as the sun, the moon, and the earth. For instance, I heard from my informants that the dharma of the sun (and the fire) is to burn, the dharma of the earth is to revolve around the sun and so forth.

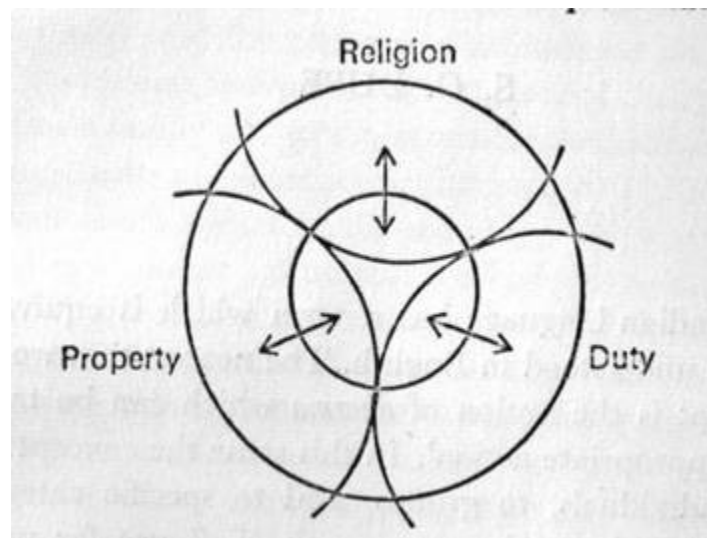


Figure 1: Popular Usage of Dharma with Meanings of Religion, Property, and Duty

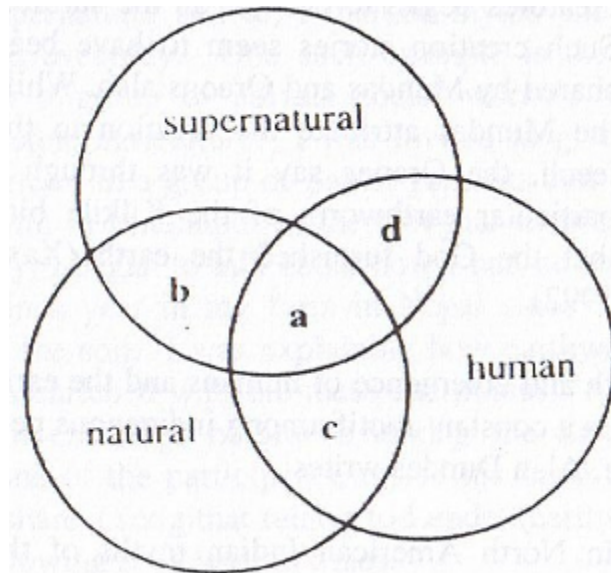


Figure 2: Dharma at the Intersection of Human, Natural, and Supernatural Worlds

Pramod Parajuli (2000) presents a similar model of intersecting human, natural, and supernatural domains and argues that the area “a” is the actual world of practice. This is where humans are engaged in deriving their livelihoods by taking care, and reshaping their material culture. Based on my analysis of dharma, it seems suitable for area “a” that Parajuli is suggesting as an intersection of human, natural, and supernatural worlds. In the human world, dharma refers to social duty. In the natural world, it refers to the intrinsic property of ecological entities. In the supernatural world, it refers to the matters related to religion. Thus, dharma works as a multivalent term signifying ethics, virtues, duties, and cosmic order.

Ariel Glucklich (1994) has suggested that the most fruitful approach to understand dharma is to set aside the quest for conceptual framework and theoretical formulations and to adopt instead a phenomenology of dharma based on a “somatic hermeneutic” that explores embodied experiences of dharma in specific spatial and temporal contexts. Glucklich convincingly employs Wolfgang Kohler's Gestalt psychology to offer a more satisfying psychological analysis as to how Indian rituals, such as river bathing (immersion in water), result in a psychosomatic purification that produces a new state of consciousness. He cites Hindu bathing as having power and meaning, not through sociological (structural or functional) or conceptual a priori systems, but through a symbolic process in which embodied sensory experiences play a dominant role in evoking a new and transforming (purifying) state of consciousness. Glucklich recognizes and tries to overcome the Cartesian conditioning that focuses on a mental conceptual analysis but ignore the key body side in the Indic experience of dharma. Glucklich maintains that the body, mind, and natural environment must be studied as a gestalt. He argues that focusing on the

images of embodied experience, rather than on noumenal concepts, helps to evoke the temporal resonance of the text and bring its dharmic experience "to life". In this way, the Cartesian dualism of mind and body is transcended via sensitivity to the powerful environment, which evokes a different mind and consciousness, for example for the early-morning bather in the Ganges. Glucklich calls this new resulting mind "the embodied imagination where perceptions, self-perception, and symbolic ideas resonate together".

Glucklich's phenomenological study of dharma seeks to correct previous approaches that have fallen into the Cartesian trap of seeking to understand Hindu dharma through mental categories only. Instead of superimposing the Western Cartesian mindset on Hindu dharma, as many previous studies have done, Glucklich examines dharma as a body-mind-environment gestalt. Thus, considerations of Hindu dharma must extend from mental textual constructs to daily experiences by the body in its immediate cosmic environment where the world is imagined as a transparent unity. As the stream of sensory experience is constantly flowing, dharma only has the appearance of permanence. While the dharma texts show that dharma boundaries are fixed and absolute, the flow of bodily experience, upon which such boundary conditions are superimposed, is constantly changing. The ambiguity that results is often better reflected in the Hindu myths. Thus, Hindu dharma manifestations at the level of bodily perception (house walls, field boundaries, rivers, etc.) are important for the study of Indian culture.

In my fieldwork with Bishnois and Swadhyayis, I noticed that by participating in different activities related to ecology, the practitioners of traditional communities such as the Swadhyayis and the Bishnois not only undergo somatic experiences but also these experiences help them to "relive" the lives of Vedic sages and other mythical figures such as Arjun. This is the embodied imagination or the "ecological mind" where perceptions, self-perception, and symbolic ideas resonate together. This is the level at which dharma means something to Hindus before it has acquired its extremely diverse lexical meanings and social functions. It connects the practitioners with the experiences of their gurus and their natural surroundings.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental problems in studying or researching Indic traditions is the search for Western categories of knowledge within them. Scholars have long wrestled with various Western categories such as religion, ethics, theology, and history and their Indic equivalents. Gerald Larson spoke about the need to apply Indic categories of knowledge to the study of India instead of looking for Western categories (2004: 1003-1020). McKim Marriott's ethnosociology of India is rooted on the same philosophical problem (1990: 1):

"It is an anomalous fact that the social sciences used in India today have developed from thought about Western rather than Indian cultural realities. As a result, although they pretend to universal applicability, the Western sciences often do not recognize and therefore cannot deal with the questions to which many Indian institutions are answers."

Elsewhere Marriott notes that the Western history has separated various domains of knowledge such as religion, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and (if I may add ethics and ecology), but the scholars should not assume that the non-Western cultures would also wish to divide them. Following Marriott, I propose not to see environmentalism, ethics, or theology as separate categories in Indic traditions, and suggest that ethics, ecology, and theology are all intertwined in Indic traditions as exemplified by various texts, recent movements, and my ethnographic encounters. I am positing this intertwined relationship in a "dharmic" framework rather than "religious" one. Bishnois and Swadhyayis continue to live the *dharmic* way of life in the sense that for them Indic traditions are part of their daily way of life and thus there is no such thing as "religion" in their lives as there is no separation of sacred from profane. Therefore, there is no such thing as environmentalism distinct and separate in their lives. Being dharmic brings them closer to practicing ethics to maintain the ecological order around them without being conscious of it. If Bishnois are saving animals and trees from invaders, they are simply living their traditions, not "protecting the environment" *per se*. If Bhils continue to practice their rituals in their Sacred Groves, it is their ancient tradition, not "saving the bio-diversity". If Swadhyayis are building tree-temples, they are simply expressing their devotion and reverence for all creation according to the Hindu teachings, not "restoring the environment".