



Reading Dharma and Karma in Godaan and The Guide: A Critical Study through Indian Philosophical Thought

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Abstract- This paper explores the concepts of Dharma and Karma in two important Indian novels, *Godaan* by Premchand and *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan. These concepts are rooted in Indian philosophical text and epic, are examined in the context of modern society and literature. The study focuses on how the characters in these novels deal with moral responsibility, duty, and the consequences of their actions. In *Godaan*, Dharma is shown as a social duty shaped by poverty, class, and societal expectations, where the protagonist struggles to balance moral values with survival. In contrast, *The Guide* presents Dharma as a more personal and evolving idea, focuses on the inner transformation of the protagonist through his actions and experiences. The paper also discusses how Karma operates differently in both texts, where we see both social realities and individual choices. By comparing these two novels, the study shows that Dharma and Karma are not fixed concepts but change according to time, society, and individual situations. The paper concludes that modern Indian literature reinterprets these traditional ideas to explore moral conflicts and human experiences in a changing world.

Keywords- Dharma, Karma, Moral Responsibility, Indian Philosophy, Modern Indian Fiction, Social vs Individual Morality.

I. Introduction

The idea of Dharma and Karma have been very important in Indian philosophy, cultural and ethics for a long time. The idea comes from ancient text such as the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita, these ideas come from old texts like the Bhagavad Gita and have shaped not only religious practices but also how people act in society and how they think about right and wrong. Dharma, is described as duty, righteousness, or moral law, represents the ethical system that governs an individual's responsibilities in life. On the other hand, Karma refers to action and the consequences, forming a moral principle that connects human behaviour with its outcomes.

Traditionally, these ideas were seen as stable and universal principles that created balance in both individual life and the large cosmic order. However, with the rise of modernity, colonialism, and transformation in society and economy, the meanings of Dharma and Karma have changed a lot. In today's world, people are wondering if these ideas are still useful and relevant in situations where there is inequality, people want to achieve their goals, and morals are not clear

Literature becomes a space for engaging with these changing interpretations. Modern Indian novels depict Dharma and Karma through lived experiences, showcasing characters struggling with moral dilemmas and conflicting responsibilities, in contrast



to philosophical texts that typically present these concepts as abstract ideas. Through narrative, literature define how Dharma and Karma operate in real life situations.

As most of the modern political theories talk about laws and rights and often ignore ethical duty and moral consciousness, which are essential for a fair, equitable and stable society This paper shows the representation of these concepts in two important works of Indian fiction, *Godaan* by Premchand and *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan. While both novels engage with question of morality, they offer distinct perspectives shaped by their respective social and narrative contexts. Through a comparative reading, this paper explores how Dharma and Karma are reinterpreted in modern Indian literature, showing how these concepts their continued to guide people in modern Indian society.

II. Dharma and Karma: From Classical Philosophy to Modern Context

Dharma and Karma are two interlinked concepts within the traditional Indian philosophical framework that shape the moral code of conduct. Dharma specifies the correct way of acting by a person based on various criteria like social position, age, and circumstances. On the other hand, Karma is responsible for ensuring that each act has its due consequence.

The Bhagavad Gita offers a highly effective representation of these beliefs, which emphasizes the significance of doing what is right without being preoccupied with its consequences. In such a case, it can be stated that the ethical behaviour is not based on the results of the actions performed but, on their intentions, and the fulfilment of one's duties.

However, when these ideals are applied to contemporary society, their simplicity becomes complex due to the challenges posed to the structural frameworks of traditional society through new social structures. People face circumstances nowadays where their duties clash with their wishes, or where the decisions that they have to make morally are influenced by economics and society around them.

This aspect is captured in modern literature whereby authors describe people faced with such circumstances. Novels do not always give a definite answer on morality but present an ambiguous aspect about Dharma. Similarly, Karma is no longer seen as a straightforward system of justice but as a process shaped by multiple factors, including intention, circumstance, and social context.

III. Social Ethics and the Burden of Duty in *Godaan*

In *Godaan*, Premchand gives a strong picture of rural Indian society, focusing on the struggles that a peasant and poor people face in a very unfair economic system. The novel's protagonist, Hori, faces a conflict between moral duties and material reality. He is always dedicated towards his commitment to fulfilling his responsibilities, yet this commitment becomes the source of his suffering.

Hori sees Dharma as a set of duties that are set by tradition and society, not something to think about on his own. For example, his desire to own a cow is not just an economic



goal; it is also a symbolic act that is linked to religious duty and social respectability. But his quest of this ideal puts him into debt and makes him a victim of exploitation, showing the harsh realities of a system that prefer social norms over individual humanity.

Premchand's representation of Dharma in *Godaan* highlights its social and restrictive nature. The characters in the novel are bound by societal expectations that leave no space for their personal choice. Hori's choices are not based on what he wants but by what he believes he must do to maintain keep his social identity. In this context Dharma operate more as a social duty than as an ethical principle.

The idea of Karma in the novel makes this picture even more complicated. While traditional philosophy suggests that good actions always lead to positive outcomes, Hori's life shows that this is not always right. Even after his sincerity and good intentions, he faces continuous hardship. His life questions the idea of Karma as a fair and predictable system, suggesting instead it shows that social force have a bigger impact on outcomes.

Premchand uses this idea to criticize the structures of inequality in rural life. The novel shows that you can't understand ethical principles without also looking at material conditions. Hori's difficulties show that things like poverty, class, and power dynamics can make it hard to do the right thing. In this way, *Godaan* gives a very realistic picture of Dharma and Karma, showing how they don't work well in an unfair society.

IV. Individual Transformation and Moral Awakening in The Guide

In contrast to the socially grounded narrative of *Godaan*, *The Guide* focuses on the inner journey of its protagonist, Raju. The novel explores themes of identity, deception, and transformation, offering a more psychological approach to the concepts of Dharma and Karma.

Raju begins as an ordinary man driven by personal ambition and desire. His involvement with Rosie and his subsequent actions, including forgery, reflect a disregard for moral responsibility. However, these actions set in motion a chain of consequences that ultimately lead to his imprisonment. Here, Karma operates as a force that compels Raju to confront the results of his behaviour.

Unlike in *Godaan*, where external conditions dominate, *The Guide* emphasizes internal change. Raju's transformation begins not with a conscious decision to become virtuous but as a response to circumstances. When he is mistakenly perceived as a spiritual guide, he initially plays along with the role. Yet, over time, he begins to internalize the expectations placed upon him, leading to a gradual shift in his self-perception.

Dharma in this novel is thus not fixed but evolving. It emerges through experience and reflection rather than being dictated by tradition. Raju's final act of fasting for the villagers represents a culmination of this transformation. Although his motivations may initially be ambiguous, the act itself becomes a genuine expression of sacrifice and responsibility.



Narayan presents Karma as a transformative process, one that allows individuals to learn from their mistakes and grow. This perspective offers a more optimistic view of human nature, suggesting that moral awareness can develop even in those who have previously acted selfishly. In this sense, *The Guide* redefines Dharma as a personal journey rather than a social obligation.

V. Contrasting Visions of Morality

A comparison of *Godaan* and *The Guide* reveals two distinct approaches to understanding Dharma and Karma. While Premchand's novel emphasizes the role of society in shaping moral behaviour, Narayan's work focuses on individual agency and transformation.

In *Godaan*, morality is deeply embedded in social structures. Dharma appears as a collective responsibility, often imposed on individuals regardless of their circumstances. Karma, in turn, reflects the influence of these structures, highlighting the ways in which outcomes are shaped by inequality and injustice.

In contrast, *The Guide* presents a more individual-centered perspective. Here, Dharma is flexible and dynamic, allowing for personal growth and change. Karma operates as a process of self-realization, guiding individuals toward a deeper understanding of their actions.

These differences reflect broader shifts in Indian society, from a tradition-bound framework to a more modern, individualistic outlook. However, both novels acknowledge the complexity of moral life, showing that ethical decisions are rarely straightforward. They highlight the tension between external expectations and internal desires, a theme that remains relevant in contemporary contexts.

VI. Relevance of Dharma and Karma in Modern Literature

The continued exploration of Dharma and Karma in modern literature underscores their enduring significance as tools for understanding human behaviour. While their traditional meanings may no longer be universally applicable, these concepts remain valuable for analysing moral dilemmas and ethical conflicts.

In contemporary society, individuals often face situations where traditional notions of duty clash with personal aspirations. Literature provides a space for examining these conflicts, offering insights into the challenges of living ethically in a complex world. By reinterpreting classical ideas, modern novels contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the nature of morality.

Both *Godaan* and *The Guide* demonstrate that Dharma and Karma are not static principles but evolving concepts that adapt to changing circumstances. They show that ethical understanding is shaped by a combination of social, economic, and psychological factors, making it a dynamic and context-dependent process.



VII. Conclusion

The study of *Godaan* and *The Guide* shows the different ways in which Dharma and Karma are represented in modern Indian literature. In *Godaan* Premchand presents a world where individuals are trapped within social structures, while on the other hand Narayan focuses on the possibility of personal change. These novels show how classical ethical concepts are reinterpreted in contemporary contexts.

Literature becomes a space where traditional philosophical concepts are tested, challenged and reimagined in response to modern life's contradictions and crises. In today's world where people often face moral confusion, social inequality, and political division, the ideas of Dharma and Karma offer a meaningful moral viewpoint on how people live, govern, and take responsibility.

Godaan and *The Guide* make readers think about their ideas of duty and action by presenting the idea of ethical dilemmas. They remind us that morality is an ongoing process that is shaped by both internal and external forces. In this way, these texts show how Indian philosophical thought continues to shape today's moral and social order.

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