Beyond the Altar: The Tension Between Individual Agency and Collective Dharma in Indian Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper advances the hypothesis that religion in Indian literature operates less as a theological inquiry into the nature of the "divine" and more as a socio-ethical arena in which the tension between individual agency and collective obligation is negotiated. Within the Indian intellectual and cultural context, the concept of *Dharma* (duty or righteousness) emerges as the central site of friction. Rather than functioning purely as a spiritual principle, Dharma frequently becomes the measure by which social conformity and moral deviation are judged.

Through a comparative reading of classical and modern texts—from the ancient epics Mahabharata and Ramayana to modern Dalit narratives and the fiction of R. K. Narayan and U. R. Ananthamurthy—this study contends that "God" often functions as a literary device that personifies societal expectations rather than as an object of mystical contemplation. Divine authority in these works frequently mirrors the voice of tradition, community, and inherited norms. Thus, in these texts the divine is articulated within the social and cultural norms rather than standing apart from them.

The central dramatic conflict in these narratives arises when a protagonist's internal moral compass, or *Svadharma* (one's personal duty), confronts the rigid prescriptions of *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal or orthodox social order). Characters are thus compelled to negotiate between authenticity and obedience, selfhood and structure. Their struggles foreground the ethical dilemmas embedded within communal life rather than metaphysical quests for transcendence.

Ultimately, Indian literature portrays religion not primarily as a pathway to salvation or spiritual transcendence, but as a complex, evolving framework through which individuals grapple with the existential challenge of situating the self within the demands and constraints of a deeply interconnected community.

Keywords: Divine, Dharma, Socio-ethical, God, Dalit

INTRODUCTION

For decades, Western critical frameworks approached Indian literature through the reductive categories of "mysticism" and "spirituality," often presuming that the dominant impulse of Indian writing was a vertical movement toward transcendence. Yet, as scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gopal Guru have argued, Indian texts are deeply embedded in socio-historical negotiations of caste, duty, and memory. Religion in Indian literature operates less as a theological inquiry into the divine essence and more as a socio-ethical grammar of collective life. The concept of **Dharma**—as theorized by B. R. Ambedkar in his reinterpretations of Hindu law—functions as both ethical imperative and ideological apparatus. Thus, when literary texts interrogate religion, they simultaneously interrogate the individual's place within the collective, situating the "self" as a node within inherited structures of caste, kinship, and kingship.

In the Indian intellectual tradition, religion is inseparable from the concept of *Dharma*—a term that encompasses duty, righteousness, law, ethics, and social order. Dharma is not merely a private spiritual ideal; it is a social imperative embedded in kinship, caste, and kingship. Thus, when literary texts interrogate religion, they are simultaneously interrogating the individual's place within the collective. The "self" in Indian literature is rarely imagined as an autonomous, self-originating unit; it is a node within a dense network of inherited expectations.

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This paper argues that Indian literature uses religion less as a theological inquiry into divine essence and more as a socio-ethical arena in which the friction between *Svadharma* (one's personal duty) and *Sanatana Dharma* (the enduring collective order) is dramatized. By examining canonical epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the devotional poetry of the Bhakti movement, modern novels by U. R. Ananthamurthy and R. K. Narayan, and Dalit autobiographical narratives like Karukku and Joothan, this study demonstrates that "God" frequently functions as a literary device personifying collective expectations.

Across centuries, genres, and linguistic traditions, Indian literature returns to a recurring question: What happens when the individual's inner moral compass conflicts with the demands of the social body? The answer, as this paper shows, is not a metaphysical resolution but a dramatization of ethical tension.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comparative literary methodology that combines close textual analysis with sociohistorical contextualization. The texts selected span ancient Sanskrit epics, medieval devotional poetry, twentieth-century regional fiction, and modern Dalit autobiographies. Such breadth allows for a diachronic exploration of how religion's literary function evolves while retaining structural continuity.

First, canonical epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—are analyzed as foundational narrative templates. These texts are treated not solely as sacred scripture but as cultural blueprints that encode archetypal conflicts between personal inclination and social obligation. Particular attention is given to the *Bhagavad Gita* episode within the Mahabharata, where philosophical discourse explicitly frames the relationship between individual agency and cosmic order.

Second, medieval Bhakti poetry is examined as a moment of ideological rupture. The works of figures such as Mirabai and Kabir are read not primarily as theological declarations but as literary performances of dissent. Their devotional address to a personal deity is interpreted as a strategy for bypassing institutional authority.

Third, modern fiction—particularly Samskara and The Guide—is analyzed to demonstrate how the epic tension migrates into psychological and domestic spaces. Here, religion functions less as cosmic law and more as internalized guilt, communal surveillance, and symbolic authority.

Finally, Dalit autobiographical narratives, including Karukku and Joothan, are examined to foreground how religion can serve as an apparatus of exclusion. In these texts, the collective is not abstract but materially oppressive.

By placing these texts in dialogue, this study identifies recurring structural patterns: the deification of social norms, the sacralization of duty, and the persistent dramatization of conflict between self and society.

RESULTS

The Epics: The Architecture of Duty

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata constitute foundational texts in which Dharma emerges as the primary organizing principle of narrative conflict. Though often categorized as sacred scripture, their dramatic force lies not in mystical revelation but in ethical crisis.

In the Ramayana, Rama's identity as the exemplar of righteousness rests upon absolute fidelity to duty. His exile—undertaken to honor his father's promise—foregrounds obedience to familial and royal obligation over personal desire. The later banishment of Sita intensifies this logic. Faced with public suspicion regarding her chastity, Rama prioritizes royal legitimacy over conjugal loyalty. The episode dramatizes the triumph of collective perception over private truth. Rama's divinity reinforces rather than transcends social order; he embodies the sacrificial cost of preserving communal stability.

The Mahabharata presents a more fractured moral universe. Karna's tragedy lies in the contradiction between individual merit and caste-based exclusion. His exceptional skill and nobility cannot overcome the stigma of

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presumed low birth. Religion here legitimizes hierarchy, embedding inequality within cosmic order. Karna's suffering exposes the violence concealed beneath sacralized structure.

The Bhagavad Gita crystallizes the epic's ethical philosophy. Arjuna's paralysis on the battlefield arises from emotional conflict: he recoils at killing kin. Krishna's counsel does not dismiss emotion but subordinates it to duty. The self must act according to its role within the cosmic design. Personal reluctance yields to structural necessity. The divine voice thus articulates a theory of action grounded in social function.

The epics therefore establish a paradigm: religion frames the individual as inseparable from collective destiny. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide the foundational architecture for understanding religion as socioethical drama.

In the Ramayana, Rama is celebrated as *Maryada Purushottama*—the ideal man. Yet his story is structured around painful choices where personal affection clashes with royal duty. The banishment of Sita exemplifies the triumph of collective expectation over individual love. Rama's divinity is secondary to his function as guardian of social order. The epic thereby frames religious righteousness as adherence to communal norms, even at devastating personal cost.

The Mahabharata intensifies this dynamic. Characters such as Karna embody the tragedy of individual merit constrained by caste hierarchy. His anguish arises not from theological doubt but from social exclusion. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna's counsel to Arjuna is not an exhortation to mystical escape but a philosophical argument for fulfilling one's role within the cosmic and social order. The self must subordinate its emotional hesitation to the demands of the Whole.

The Bhakti Movement: Religion as Defiance

The Bhakti movement (c. 8th–18th centuries) reconfigures this paradigm by relocating authority from institutional hierarchy to interior devotion. Yet even here, religion remains a site of social negotiation.

Mirabai's devotional poems to Krishna constitute more than spiritual longing. By declaring the deity her true husband, she symbolically rejects patriarchal marriage and royal obligation. Devotion authorizes dissent. Her religious language legitimizes withdrawal from oppressive social roles.

Similarly, Kabir dismantles ritual orthodoxy across religious traditions. His verses ridicule external markers of piety and emphasize the immediacy of inner realization. For Kabir, God is not mediated through temple or mosque but encountered within the self. This interiorization undermines institutional authority and challenges communal boundaries.

The Bhakti poets dramatize the tension between individual desire and collective obligation through rhetorical strategies that destabilize orthodoxy. Mirabai's metaphor of Krishna as her "true husband" is not merely devotional—it is a radical reconfiguration of patriarchal marriage. Her use of intimate, erotic imagery authorizes dissent by sanctifying personal autonomy. Kabir, by contrast, employs satire and paradox: "The clay pot spoke, the wheel turned, the potter laughed." Such metaphors ridicule ritual orthodoxy and expose the emptiness of external piety. As recent feminist readings (Sharma, 2022) suggest, Bhakti rhetoric transforms devotion into a language of resistance, where metaphor and narrative voice reimagine community around affect rather than hierarchy.

However, Bhakti does not abolish collectivity; it reimagines it. Devotional communities form around shared affect and egalitarian ideals. Thus, religion shifts from enforcing hierarchy to enabling alternative solidarities. The tension between individual and collective persists, but its configuration changes.

Between the 8th and 18th centuries, Bhakti poets transformed religion into an instrument of radical interiority. Mirabai's declaration of Krishna as her true husband allowed her to reject patriarchal authority. Kabir mocked ritual orthodoxy across religious boundaries. In their works, God becomes a higher allegiance that authorizes defiance of immediate social structures.

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Here, religion is not submission but resistance. The divine serves as a legitimizing force for personal autonomy.

Modern Fiction: Internalized Conflict

In twentieth-century literature, the epic tension between self and social order migrates inward, becoming psychological and existential.

In Samskara, Praneshacharya epitomizes Brahminical orthodoxy. His identity is constructed through ritual purity and communal reverence. When confronted with the death of a heretical villager and later with his own transgressive desire, the coherence of his moral world collapses. Religion functions here as internalized surveillance; guilt replaces external enforcement. The novel resists closure, leaving its protagonist suspended between inherited identity and emergent self-awareness. Dharma is no longer unquestioned structure but contested terrain.

The Guide presents a different but related dynamic. Raju, a charismatic tour guide and conman, inadvertently becomes a religious ascetic. The villagers' faith projects sanctity onto him, transforming performance into obligation. His eventual fast—initially fraudulent—acquires sincerity as communal expectation intensifies. The novel exposes the mechanism by which society manufactures spiritual authority. Religion becomes collective need embodied in an individual.

In both novels, the divine is not metaphysical presence but social force. The individual is shaped, constrained, and sometimes consumed by communal religious imagination.

In Samskara, Praneshacharya's moral crisis reveals the fragility of collective purity. His transgressive encounter shatters the illusion of spiritual superiority, leaving him suspended between communal identity and individual awakening.

In The Guide, Raju becomes a reluctant saint. The community's need for a holy figure transforms him into a symbol he never intended to embody. Religion here is a projection of collective desire that consumes the individual.

Dalit Narratives: Religion as Exclusion

Dalit autobiographies such as Bama's *Karukku* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* foreground religion as an apparatus of humiliation. Valmiki's stark narrative voice—"The leftovers of the upper castes became our food"—renders exclusion through visceral metaphor. The rhetoric of pollution and purity becomes a lived wound, dramatized through memory and embodied narration. Bama's metaphor of the "wounded body" functions as both personal testimony and collective memory, situating Dalit identity within a continuum of systemic violence. Contemporary Dalit theorists (Guru, 2020) argue that such texts reclaim dignity by reconfiguring sacred language into a discourse of resistance. Thus, religion is not merely oppressive but narratively central to articulating liberation.

Dalit writing confronts religion's complicity in caste oppression. In Karukku and Joothan, sacred order is inseparable from systemic humiliation. Ritual purity codes justify segregation and degradation. For Dalit authors, the conflict between individual and collective is not abstract ethical drama but lived experience. Religion functions as ideological apparatus, naturalizing hierarchy. The struggle becomes one of reclaiming humanity against sacralized exclusion.

Yet even in critique, the framework of religion structures narrative articulation. Liberation is expressed through reinterpretation, rejection, or reconfiguration of the sacred. The divine remains narratively central— even when contested.

Dalit texts invert traditional narratives. In Karukku and Joothan, religion functions as systemic exclusion. Ritual becomes humiliation; community becomes oppression. The individual's struggle is to reclaim dignity outside the religious collective.

Across these genres, the recurring result is clear: religion structures the confrontation between self and society.

DISCUSSION

While this study emphasizes religion as socio-ethical negotiation, it is important to acknowledge countertraditions that foreground transcendence. Mystical strands of Advaita Vedanta-inspired poetry, or Andal's devotional mysticism, do pursue metaphysical union with the divine. These traditions complicate the argument by showing that Indian literature is not monolithic. Yet even here, transcendence is often articulated through metaphor and narrative voice that remain socially embedded. The dialectic between **Svadharma** (personal duty) and **Sanatana Dharma** (collective order) persists, whether dramatized as ethical conflict or mystical longing.

The epics sacralize collective stability; Bhakti poetry sacralizes interior conviction; modern novels expose psychological fragmentation; Dalit autobiographies expose structural injustice. Yet in all cases, "God" operates as a symbolic authority representing communal values.

This reframing challenges the assumption that Indian literature is preoccupied with metaphysical transcendence. Instead, it reveals a tradition deeply invested in ethical negotiation within society. Religion becomes a language for articulating belonging, dissent, shame, and aspiration.

Moreover, the persistence of this structure across centuries indicates that the individual–collective dialectic is not incidental but constitutive of the tradition. The sacred and the social are inseparable.

CONCLUSION

Indian literature portrays religion not primarily as a path to salvation but as a complex framework for navigating the existential predicament of living within a community. From Arjuna's hesitation on the battlefield to Raju's reluctant sainthood, from Mirabai's devotional defiance to Dalit assertions of dignity, the central drama is consistent: the individual striving to define the self amid the pressures of history, caste, family, and nation.

Religion supplies the stakes. It amplifies private action into collective consequence. In this sense, "God" is often less a metaphysical presence than a narrative embodiment of societal expectation.

The enduring power of Indian literature lies in its recognition that freedom and order are perpetually in tension. The individual seeks authenticity; the collective seeks continuity. Religion is the bridge—and sometimes the barrier—between the two.

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