

## The concept of dharma in 'Bridge of Rama'

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### Abstract

'Bridge of Rama' is fifth novel of Ramayana Series penned by Ashok Banker that explored the concept of 'Dharma'. It becomes the recurring theme of the novel. It presents through various perspectives of various major characters of the novel.

**Keywords:** Dharma, virtue, righteousness, duty

### 1. Introduction

Dharma is a word derived from Sanskrit that means to uphold or maintains the order. '*Dhaaranaaddharmamityaahuh dharmena vidhrutaah prajah*' (Banker) Dharma is considered as a set of moral values or ethics. It implies the code of conduct. Human being is assessed in society by his or her manner and mode of living. 'Bridge of Rama' explores the concept of Dharma. In Ancient texts, dharma is defined and elaborated minutely. Ramayana and Mahabharata offer many examples of dharma. According to the Bhagavad-Gita meaning of Dharma, "Dharma is that which holds a thing together, makes it what it is, prevents it from breaking up and changing into something else, its characteristic function, its peculiar property, and its fundamental attribute, its essential nature is its dharma, the law of its being, primarily. That which makes the world process what it is, and holds all its parts together as one whole, in a break less all binding chain of causes and effects is the law of nature." (S. Radhakrishnan)

The present paper is an endeavor to illustrate various aspects of the concept of Dharma through the perspectives of various characters depicted in the novel 'Bridge of Rama'.

'Bridge of Rama' is the fifth novel of Ashok Banker, which narrates the story of Rama in exile. This novel contains major incidents like Sita's imprisonment in Lanka, Hanuman's self-discovery, the construction of bridge to Lanka, Hanuman's giant leap to Lanka. The novel is very important because it presents crucial moments of Ramayana. Ashok Banker describes various episodes that express the concept of Dharma. It is also noticed that different characters use this concept in different ways. Different people at different level manifest the understanding of the concept. Dharma is an integral part of this novel. The concept of Dharma is relative term. Different people define it in different ways.

The concept of Dharma explored by Jambvan in this novel to Hanuman clearly shows its variant meanings throughout various periods of history. He says,

"It is a way of the world. The law of nature itself. Mortals only choose to interpret it and apply it to their own world. And even that interpretation will change as the aeons go by. In another age, far distant, will come to mean merely Duty, like a given task or chore. And still later, in a dark age filled with garish

soul-blackening light, the age of Iron and Death, it will mean merely Religion. A series of rituals, the true origin or purpose of which will have been long forgotten, obscured, and worst of all, perverted." (Banker 7)

The above argument indicates that dharma is not synonymous of the word religion but it is the latent order of nature and all of its creatures regarding their behaviour. In the course of time, its meaning changes. Human being relates the changing meaning of dharma to his or her conduct. In the novel, this changed meaning of dharma is put up by Ravana, his wife Mandodhari and it is countered by Vibhisena, Hanuman and Sita. The different aspects of Dharma are seen through the communication of Ravana and Sita, Hanuman and Ravana, Mandodhari and Vibhisena.

At the beginning of the novel, in Kaand first, second chapter, Sita charged Ravana's action as inhuman of her abduction. Ravana replies it with his own understanding of the actions of Rama and puts it logically so that it seems that the abduction is his right action. He says,

"The great asura army that came so close to decimating and subjugating the mortal world that fateful day is no more. Nor can such an army ever be assembled again." (Banker 24) Further he explores,

"Your Rama is responsible for the most widespread asura genocide ever accomplished. You must be quiet proud of your genocidal, race-eliminator husband." (Banker 24)

In this novel, a crucial incident is of the abduction of Sita by Ravana. Various characters scrutinize this action of Ravana. They all meditate on the rightness or wrongness of this action, which ultimately comes under the concept of Dharma. That is why it is a core concept used in the novel. Sita is in the imprisonment of Ravana in Ashoka grove. She was treated inhumanly by the rakshasis under the guidance of Mandodhari, the wife of Ravana and Queen of Lanka. Ravana became successful in imprinting his biased version of Sita's behaviour in the mind of Mandodhari, which imposes her to treat Sita inhumanly in the imprisonment. Vibhisena, brother of Ravana and Brother-in-law of Mandodhari, opposes the treatment that he thinks is not as per the code of dharma. Mandodhari convinced him the rightness of her act but Vibhisena asked her to act according to dharma. According to him, "What is right is

right, wrong is wrong. Nothing can alter that basic truth.” (Banker 207) His emphasis is on the right act i.e. dharma. To tease anyone in this world is itself a wrong act. This is what he thinks is a truth. Truth is a foundation of dharma. Vibhisena wants Mandodhari to act according to dharma as he respects her as a woman of dharma. (Banker 206) Mandodhari has clear knowledge of Dharma that is why she said, “What else is the goal of dharma after all? To support the truth.” (Banker 209) Here Mandodhari wants to inform Vibhisena regarding Sita’s intentions of which he is unknown. Mandodhari appoints his sakhis to get the truth from the lips of Sita. It is because Ravana has put his own version of Sita’s story to Mandodhari and she trusts in Ravana. Vibhisena wants to clarify the picture created by Ravana in the mind of Mandodhari regarding Sita as he has visited Sita and witnesses atrocities done to her. Vibhisena becomes furious because he thinks it is an act of inhumanity to treat a unarmed and defenceless woman in such a terrible way. In the whole novel, the concept revolves in the light of treatment given to Sita. It is projected as legal by Mandodhari as she thinks Sita as a threat to her position. Vibhisena opposes it because he thinks that she is prisoner and unarmed in such cases Sita should be given human treatment. Ravana has different opinion. He wants to convince Sita by torturing her psychologically. Supanakha supports Ravana’s view and played a key role in that direction.

The entry of Hanuman in the Lanka changed the scenario of Lanka. Though Ravana is considered as mighty lord of rakshasas but none of his brave warriors able to fight with Hanuman. It suggests that Hanuman is embodiment of Dharma. He believes that whatever Rama does it is based on Dharma. According to Him, Rama as well as Sita is a paragon of dharma. When he saw the pitiful condition of Sita in Ashoka grove, he became furious and challenged everyone whoever it may be. His faith in dharma makes him mighty to fight anyone in the Lanka. He just wants to convey the message to unconquerable Lanka and his Lord that only on Vanar like Hanuman can make you down then what will happen when such millions of vanars will come to Lanka with Rama.

When Hanuman reached Ashoka Grove and after observing the pitiful condition of Sita, he asked to Sita to come with him so that they can reach as early as possible to Rama. But Sita denies it and says, for the sake of dharma and honour of Rama, she has to stay in Lanka till Rama came to Lanka and wage a war against Ravana.

Being Sita is a prisoner, yet she is hopeful that someone will consider her plea regarding the inhuman treatment given to her. She believes in the thoughts of King Janaka, her father, who always imparts her that all the beings though it may be rakshasa, devas, daityas, human, animate, inanimate, everyone is created by Supreme being.

Ravana is intellectual king. He is master in interpreting the facts with different perspectives. He has capacity to make others to believe in his version of truth. In this novel there is a long debate of Vibhisena and Mandodhari on the topic of truth and dharma. This discussion happened due to the issue of Sita’s abduction and imprisonment. The treatment given to Sita is the center point of their discussion. Vibhisena said that it is wrong to treat the prisoner in cruel manner particularly women who is actually abducted without her will. Mandodhari called this act as a dharma of them but he asks, “How can mortal interpretation of dharma be different from our own? What is right is right, wrong is wrong. Nothing can alter that basic truth.”(207) Yet she

argued on the nature of the truth and dharma. She replies, “Yet truth itself is always debatable. Do you know – of course you know, how could I forget that you are more learned even than I, but still, excuse me as I remind you of these trivial details--- You know that the very word we use for truth, artha in fact means wealth? Because the ancients believed that truth was wealth, knowledge the greatest possession of all. Yet with every passing age we grow more impoverished, for while we accumulate the physical trappings of superficial wealth, we lose the ultimate source of wealth itself, truth. And that great storehouse is looted by us without respect or regard for its real value. So think carefully, brother of my husband. This truth you speak of. How did you come by this truth? Did you perceive the events in question yourself or were you told what happened by another party?”(207) This long speech of Mandodhari focuses many aspects of truth. Its changing aspect, changing meaning with the time. It also shows that Mandodhari’s understanding of the concept of truth. She thinks it as a real wealth of being. At the same time she talks another aspects of truth is that it is defined by various perspective. In the case of Sita, she thinks that Vibhisena relies on the truth presented to him by Sita but she is not aware that Sita has not spoken a single syllable of the word to Vibhisena. So Vibhisena replied to her in spite of debate on truth she should stop her sakhis from the torturing to Sita. Because again he presents his view that it is a crime of dharma to torture a being.

Further Mandodhari applies her own version of interpreting truth as boosted by Ravana in her mind. She explains clearly, “This is war. The mortals are at war with us. Do not mistake it for anything less.”(208) She leads her argument in the name of war. And proves her point, “That woman betrayed her own spouse and seduced mine. She thought to become queen of Lanka and replace me.”(208) The alternate version of truth presented by Mandodhari which also shows her fear of replacing her position of Queen which is false but she thinks it as true. Her explanation is none other than her fear. She continues, “Alternately, if her husband, the conniving mortal that he is, wins the coming war, then she will no doubt turn back to him, batting those big doe eyes, and say she did all this for him, to aid him in his campaign. And he would probably believe her.”(208) So all the truth as designed by Ravana presented by Mandodhari shows that any event can be interpreted through various perspectives. It sometimes can deceive intellectual person as well, as it is observed here. From the discussion on truth, Mandodhari proves her ultimate mastery over logic and philosophy but still she is fooled by Ravana of which she is unknown. It also shows us that fear can eclipse the truth and can darken the real face of truth.

## 2. Conclusion

The concept of Dharma is explored in the light of the episode of Sita’s abduction. This unjust act becomes core element of this novel. ‘Abduction of Sita’ is considered as right action by Ravana. He rationalized his action to Mandodhari and the royal court of Lanka. As a faithful wife and dutiful queen Mandodhari believes in Ravana’s opinion. It becomes her duty to have faith in husband i.e. Patnidharma. Whereas many characters such as Vibhisena, Trijata, Hanuman, Jambavan, Rama, Lakshman think this unjust action of Ravana as unethical. Karma, that is, action has a prominent place in Indian philosophy. How karma affects the life of human being is well propagated by Indian scriptures. To perform action for the welfare of the world is

always considered as good action. Therefore, good action (sat karma) is necessary which is at the center of Dharma. No one can exist even for a fraction of a second without karma. But it is said that karma should be based on moral values which are observed in this novel. It also shows how evil deeds can affect all the humanity. So in this way the concept of Dharma for Ravana is an instrument of war but for Rama and Vibhisena is an ethical way of life.

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