

## Review

Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma. Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 768 pp. £45.00. ISBN 9780195394238 (hardback).

**Reviewed by:** Fabrizio M. Ferrari, University of Chester.  
f.ferrari@chester.ac.uk

In this encyclopaedic volume, Alf Hiltebeitel explores the concept of *dharma* in Indic traditions and cultures. The book is divided into 13 chapters: (1) Introduction, 3–33; (2) Aśoka Maurya, 35–50; (3) A Vedic History of *Dharma*, 51–101; (4) Early Buddhism: Three Baskets of *Dharma*, 103–179; (5) Post-Vedic Brahmanical *Dharma*, 181–241; (6) *Dharma* Over Time, I: Big Time *Dharma*, 243–72; (7) *Dharma* Over Time, II: Prophecies of Disaster, 273–36; (8) Women's *Dharma*: Śāstric Norms and Epic Narratives, 337–410; (9) Two *Dharma* Biographies? Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira, 411–80; (10) Draupadī and Sītā: *Dharmapatnīs* of Two Different Kinds, 481–516; (11) *Dharma* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, 517–68; (12) *Dharma* and *Bhakti*, 569–624; (13) Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*: A Buddhist Reading of the Sanskrit Epics and Their Treatments of *Dharma*, 625–84. Chapters are followed by an extensive Bibliography (685–725) and an Index (727–47).

Unlike a previous and more succinct version of this book (A. Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010, 188pp.]), this volume successfully offers a readership of academics, researchers and postgraduate students the indispensable tools for an analysis of one of the founding concepts of Indic culture. This is achieved through an exhaustive exploration of Hindu and Buddhist Sanskrit and Pali literature (including commentaries) and the way they penetrated local and trans-regional culture.

The intent of the author is clear from the subtitle: *Its [dharma's] Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*. This is precious information. Having established the boundaries of his project, historically as well as methodologically, Hiltebeitel is able to efficaciously address his sources and proceed to an erudite, articulate and engaging analysis of the way in which the concept of *dharma* developed from its earliest formulation. The style is also praiseworthy. Not only does Hiltebeitel review previous academic inquiries into the subject matter (see the analysis of French, German and British Indological and philological works). Also, he is able to suggestively reveal the poetics and the beauty of the different material used in the volume.

The structure of the book is extremely clear and contextualizes *dharma* as a key issue in South Asian history, rather than an isolate philosophical concept limited to an elite of scholars. Chapters like the one dedicated to Aśoka's inscriptions (2), the one discussing *strīdharmā* (8) or the analysis of *dharma* and *bhakti* (12) make us aware of the profound impact of *dharma* and *dharmic* notions in society, politics, ethics and jurisprudence. Further to that, Hiltebeitel engages with an analysis of *dharma* vis-à-vis other important concepts in Indic culture. Some are more germane to philosophical enquiries (e.g. *mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*, *yoga*, *bhakti*), others reveal an interest in the conception of the world, its origin and development (cosmology and the concept of time in Chapters 6 and 7).

Hiltebeitel informs us that *dharma* is a unique concept indigenous to South Asia. This underwent adjustments from its early appearance in Vedic sources and has contributed to the shifting of social paradigms, the implementation of new norms, and the rise of a variety of philosophies and spiritual paths. The book bears evidence to a painstaking analysis of primary resources and the ways these were thought of and lived (or performed) in pre-modern Indic societies. The study of the *Mahābhārata* (including the *Bhagavad gītā*) is impressive in this sense. The analysis of *dharma* in the great Hindu epic is a dialectic examination which embraces different styles, narratives, genres and perspectives. We are informed that *dharma* does in fact not belong to an authority—or a group exerting hegemony—but is a flexible concept responding to the needs of the human being.

The only flaw I see in this book is that the analysis is restricted to Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. Surely *dharma* is central to Jain speculations too, which are coeval to Buddhism. Further, one is perplexed by the use of the world 'India'—which is a national, and rather recent, construct—instead of a more general but accurate 'South Asia'. This, unfortunately, is something that still affects much of contemporary academia.

To conclude, Hiltebeitel has offered with this book a summa of one of the most important Indic concepts. Its structure, contents, style, use of resources and hermeneutical approach are commendable. This is an academic work which is bound to last.