Semantic and Conceptual Appraisals of Dharma and their Implications for a Glocal Understanding of Religion: A Hermeneutical and Postcolonial Analysis
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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the multifaceted concept of “dharma” within the indigenous Indian tradition and challenges the colonial and Indian nationalist interpretations that tend either to equate dharma with Western religion or to impose it as a synonym for Hinduism. In response to such colonial and nationalist interpretations, the multifaceted idea of dharma has far-reaching implications for a glocal understanding of religion that confronts the diverse realities of the contemporary world, showing the relevance of a global conceptualization of dharma. In an attempt to investigate the global conceptualization of dharma, this research began with the following key question: “What are the semantic and conceptual appraisals of the notion of dharma within the indigenous Indian tradition, and what are the implications of such meanings for a glocal understanding of religion beyond colonial, Western, and Indian nationalist interpretations?” To address this question, I have divided the thesis into two parts. In the first part of this study, chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the semantic and conceptual nuances of dharma, with an emphasis on its broader engagement with society, culture, cosmic existence, and so on, in the light of a hermeneutical position. In the second part, conversely, chapters 5 and 6 conclude that colonial and Indian interpretations of dharma are primarily homogeneous. But what this section explicitly suggests is that dharma has a hybridized meaning that transcends national and transnational boundaries. It offers a better understanding of a global and local perspective on religion, which is critical to the Western category of religion in the light of a postcolonial and glocal approach.

In the first chapter, I set the research context by introducing methodological frameworks such as intercultural hermeneutics, postcolonialism, and glocalization to discuss the relationship between dharma, the Western concept of religion, and its global dimensions. It highlights how postcolonialism exposes power dynamics in non-Western concepts, intercultural hermeneutics provides cultural context, and glocalization reveals global-local influences of dharma. In this chapter, I have briefly introduced the role of colonialism as colonial powers, particularly the British, simplified, distorted, and misrepresented indigenous beliefs, practices, and even concepts.

In the second chapter, I explore the semantic origins and evolution of the concept of dharma. It examines ancient Indian texts and philosophical schools to uncover the diverse meanings of dharma, including its “Vedic,” “non-Vedic,” and “post-Vedic” semantic shifts. This chapter concludes that dharma is not exclusively tied to Hinduism but has indigenous roots in various Indic traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and even non-Aryan traits, with evolving meanings influenced by different historical and philosophical contexts.

In the third chapter, the study examines the conceptual continuities of dharma, emphasizing its fundamental role in Eastern beliefs and its representation of various aspects of the human condition in India. The continuity of dharma spans socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions, including puruṣārtha (goals of life), varṇadharma (social classes), and āśramadharma (stages of life). In this chapter, I argue that this continuing engagement of dharma is rooted in “contextual,” “cosmic,” “secular,” and “theological” constructs, and that it takes on its own distinctive characteristics in different contexts, including class-based social systems, particularly in Brahmanical hierarchical positions. It stresses that dharma is diverse and rejects the notion of a single, unified identity.

In the fourth chapter, the study explores how the concept of dharma evolves within different localities. I highlight that the intricate connections of dharma are significantly linked to specific geographical localities and life situations and undergo dynamic changes across historical periods and regions. These local manifestations of dharma express various identities, such as art, literature, music, and dance, and are often shaped by class differences or reflected in the cultural practices of low-class communities. This chapter also challenges the imposition of Western categories like “ethics” and “law” on non-Western concepts, arguing
that localized expressions of dharma have unique morals, norms, practices, and customs that resist universal claims.

The fifth chapter examines the Western concept of “religion” and its association with the colonial construction of Hinduism. It shows how this association has narrowed the scope of dharma in contemporary Indian political and religio-cultural contexts. In this chapter, I argue that the modern Indian and Western narrative of dharma is flawed because it oversimplifies its meanings and misrepresents Hinduism as a solitary religion. This reduction of “dharma” to “Hinduism” is due to the influence of Indian elites, British bureaucrats, Christian missionaries, Hindu reformers, and Indian nationalists, which impoverishes the richness of the term within Indian culture and society. I conclude, therefore, that this construction of dharma as Hinduism emerges as an Indian response to Western imperialism and missionary activity and has implications for various Hindu reform movements and contemporary political organizations in India.

In the final chapter, I conclude by proposing that the diverse expressions of dharma in different historical periods can be reconciled through the lens of cross-cultural paradigms. It advocates a glocal understanding of dharma that eschews the homogeneity and universal claims imposed by colonial and Indian constructions of religion. The chapter argues that dharma is a global, multifaceted concept that engages with different aspects of global life, thereby transcending cultural and geopolitical boundaries by embracing its various manifestations, such as temple traditions, guruism, ayurveda, and yoga, as “transnational,” “hybridized,” “indigenous,” and “vernacular” forms. This idea of dharma offers a better glocal understanding of religion than what is constructed as homogeneous religious ideas in the contemporary world.

This research seeks to broaden the understanding of dharma by exploring its semantic, cultural, local, and global dimensions. Bringing together hermeneutic, postcolonial, and glocal perspectives, the study takes a novel interdisciplinary approach to illuminate the diverse manifestations of dharma in different historical periods. It highlights the importance of re-imagining ancient and contemporary texts to reveal the multifaceted nature of dharma in a global context. For this reason, I challenge Western notions of religion by presenting dharma as a glocal concept, highlighting its diverse and pluralistic manifestations. Over all, this study emphasizes the inclusivity and indigenous roots of dharma, transcending its homogenous meaning of religion as Hinduism.