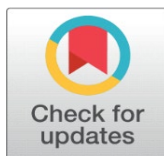
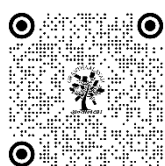


# DHARMA, DUTY AND DEVOTION: EXPLORING MARITAL INSTITUTION IN RAMAYANA AND MAHABHARATA

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## DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.3643

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The examination of marital unions in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two renowned Indian epics, presents a captivating analysis of the institution of marriage throughout ancient times in India. This research paper explores the portrayal of marriages in epic narratives, providing insights into the many viewpoints, beliefs and societal conventions related to marital unions within Indian culture. The *Ramayana* prominently features the concept of marriage, as seen by the sacred bond formed between Rama and Sita. This marital union is frequently regarded as the quintessence of an exemplary matrimony, highlighting steadfast affection, dedication and moral excellence. The unwavering faithfulness exhibited by Sita throughout her period of banishment, along with Rama's unwavering dedication to her despite encountering several challenges, serves as a compelling demonstration of the deep connection inherent in a matrimonial union. The *Mahabharata* presents a comprehensive and varied portrayal of the institution of marriage. The epic encompasses polygamous relationships, partnerships within families and intricate dynamics inside marriages. The matrimonial union between Draupadi and Arjuna, characterized by the Swayam Var ceremony and subsequent practice of polyandry, presents a departure from established societal conventions. The matrimonial unions between Kunti and Pandu, as well as the alliances formed between different royal lineages, serve to emphasize the political and dynastic aspects inherent in the institution of marriage. Furthermore, the figure of Draupadi serves as a representation of the resilience and empowerment of women within the framework of marriage relationships.

**Keywords:** Matrimony, Spousal Devotion, Sacred Unions, Vows and Rituals, Marital Customs, Conjugal Duties, Polygamy, Swayam Var, Marital Virtues, Marriage Symbolism, etc.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is portrayed as a sacred and diverse institution in Indian epics like The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata*, which are part of India's rich cultural and historical tapestry. It symbolizes the coming together of two people, but also of families, communities and even the forces of God. In the context of marriage, these epics frequently highlight the values of devotion, loyalty and obligation. Many cultures view marriage as a means of carrying out one's dharma or sacred duty and of ensuring the survival of family names and dynasties. They represent the joining of two individuals who complement each other and help each other develop into better people. Moreover, these epics depict a broad variety of marital dynamics, from arranged marriages and polygamous unions to love marriages, illustrating the diversity of customs and values that have molded the concept of marriage in Indian society. Marriage in the Indian epics is a metaphor for the complex interplay between human and divine aspects in the context of interpersonal relationships, as well as a reflection of enduring societal conventions and ideals. In the author's preface, C. Rajagopalachari expounds about the significance of the *Ramayana* within the Indian context, "One cannot understand Hindu dharma unless one knows Rama and Sita, Bharata, Lakshmana, Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Hanuman" (2). But what is dharma? In Hindu

scriptures, dharma is the eternal law that governs the moral and ethical duties of individuals, aligning their actions with cosmic order and righteousness. According to the Bhagavad Gita, dharma is the path of righteousness and one's duty, determined by their role in society and stage of life.

For Hindus as for religious people of other traditions, "religion" cannot be understood as one segment of life. The term dharma may be translated as "religion," "law," "order," "duty" or "ethics." It is far more encompassing than any of the particular activities that might be described as "religion." Dharma is what centers, upholds, and makes meaningful all activities, not just those done at certain times and certain places. ("Dharma: The Social Order")

In Hindu scriptures, marriage is considered a sacred bond and a key element of grihastha ashrama (householder stage), one of the four stages of life outlined in the Vedas and Dharma Shastras. "The word *grihastha* thus means that which is living in and occupied with home, family or simply a householder. This stage of life follows the stage of *brahmacharya* (bachelor student)" (Mehra). Texts like *Ramayana* emphasize that marriage is not merely a personal union but a dharmic responsibility, where the husband and wife work together to uphold family values, perform sacred rituals, and contribute to societal harmony. Marital duties include mutual respect, loyalty, and cooperation, with the wife often regarded as the ardhangini (half of the husband) and an equal partner in fulfilling spiritual and worldly obligations. These principles underscore the dharmic foundation of marriage, emphasizing harmony and the fulfillment of collective duties. So, duties within marriage are portrayed as mutual responsibilities grounded in dharma, aimed at maintaining righteousness, fostering family welfare and achieving spiritual growth. Pati dharma emphasizes the husband's role in offering protection, guidance and material support, while patni dharma highlights the wife's role in nurturing the household, supporting her husband, and ensuring harmony. These roles are interdependent, reflecting the dharmic view of marriage as a sacred partnership crucial for upholding grihastha dharma (householder duties) and preserving cosmic balance.

The devotion of Rama to Sita in the *Ramayana* is often cited as a model of what a marriage should be like. Both Rama and Sita's devotion to each other throughout Sita's exile in the forest are renowned for their heroic qualities. When Kausalya told Sita to respect and follow Rama even though he didn't have the kingdom during Ayodhya Kanda, Sita replies, "A Veena cannot exist without its strings. A chariot cannot exist without its wheels. Without her husband, a woman can never live happily despite having a hundred sons" (Brahma). The love that exists between Rama and Sita, as described in the *Ramayana*, is a profound and unbreakable tie that is not restricted by the constraints of either time or location. Their love story is revered because it was characterized by steadfast loyalty and unflinching commitment. Sita's beauty, grace, and inner attributes captivate Rama, the personification of virtue and righteousness. Sita, on the other hand, is taken aback by Rama's noble nature and lack of self-interest. Their love for one another grows stronger as they go through adversity and suffering together, most notably during their time spent in self-imposed isolation in the woods. The unwavering love and devotion demonstrated by Rama and Sita during Sita's period of exile in the forest have become the stuff of legend. Sita tells Kausalya during Ayodhya Kanda that she will respect and follow Rama even though he does not have the kingdom. Sita said, "A Veena cannot exist without its strings. A chariot cannot exist without its wheels. Without her husband, a woman can never live happily despite having a hundred sons" (Editorial Staff).

The story of Sita's unflinching commitment and Rama's undying devotion to her is one that has been told and retold for many decades and even centuries. When Rama and Sita were separated, Rama expressed his emotions to Sita, "Ever since I have been separated from you, Sita, everything to me has become its very reverse. The fresh and tender leaves on the trees look like tongues of fire; nights appear as dreadful as the night of final dissolution and the moon scorches like the sun" (Ceedaar et al.). Their love is seen as the quintessential example of dharma (responsibility), mutual respect, and undying commitment in a couple's relationship. The story of Rama and Sita has not only remained in the hearts of millions of people throughout the ages, but it also continues to symbolise the essence of genuine love as well as the power of a partnership that is built on shared ideals and steadfast dedication. There exists a discourse surrounding the themes of eternal love and predestined fate, as shown by the writings of Valmiki,

You cannot count on the physical proximity of someone you love, all the time. A seed that sprouts at the foot of its parent tree remains stunted until it is transplanted. Rama will be in my care, and he will be quite well. But ultimately, he will leave me too. Every human being, when the time comes, has to depart to seek his fulfilment in his own way. (Sachdeva)

Both Lakshmana, the devoted younger brother of Lord Rama, and Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, are excellent examples of those who are deeply committed to their responsibilities as well as their families. When Lakshmana's older brother, Lord Rama, is sentenced to a life of exile in the jungle, Lakshmana voluntarily accompanies him, despite the fact that he

must leave behind his devoted wife, Urmila. He makes a solemn oath to himself that he will watch over Rama's wellbeing throughout their time in exile by being awake and vigilant. Urmila, on the other hand, shows incredible selflessness by accepting the decision that her husband has made and by gladly sleeping in his place so that he can carry out his responsibility without anxiety. Her refusal to give up sleep and her unflinching support reveal the profound love that she harbors for Lakshmana as well as her commitment to maintaining dharma, even if it comes at the expense of her own comfort. Lakshmana willingly accompanies his elder brother, Lord Rama, into a life of exile inside the woods subsequent to Rama's sentencing. When Lakshman approached his spouse Urmila to take leave. She says,

The duty of a wife is to constantly be in the company of her husband. But to fulfill my duty, how can I obstruct yours? Performing a duty serves its purpose only when the object of duty is pleased. If I insist that I do my duty to you by accompanying you, you will be displeased because the object of your duty, Rama, will be displeased with your negligence. So, my duty now is to facilitate the perfection you can attain in your responsibility by staying away. (Swami)

The love story that unfolds between the characters Kunti and Pandu in the *Mahabharata* is a moving and nuanced illustration of loyalty and self-sacrifice. The legend of Kunti begins with her great goodness and dedication, which earned her the one-of-a-kind blessing of being able to invoke deities and bear children by them. She winds up marrying Pandu, the righteous and just king, and the two of them have a love tale that is characterized by mutual respect and comprehension. However, because Pandu is unable to have children normally as a result of the curse, Kunti is forced to make use of her supernatural gift in order to secure the continuation of their dynasty. Her altruistic efforts of petitioning deities to bear offspring for Pandu, including the birth of Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna are examples of her unwavering love and loyalty to her husband. The deeds that Kunti does highlight the sacrifices that have been made in the name of love and responsibility, and her relationship with Pandu is a tribute to the complexity and sacrifices that can be entwined with great love and dedication to a person or thing. The marriage dynamics in the *Mahabharata* range from the steady love and unflinching commitment of Draupadi to her five husbands, the Pandavas, to the intricate politics and familial alliances found in the weddings of characters like Kunti and Pandu. One example of the former is Draupadi's love for and loyalty to the Pandavas. "Draupadi's marriage however is enough to tell us the dynamics of control exercised over women, even one as strong as Draupadi. On characterizing the streedharma of *Mahabharata* the discussion among Draupadi and Satyabhama implies a great deal" (Enrouel). The strength of their relationship may be seen in Draupadi's dedication to both of her husbands, as well as in their profound love for her. Draupadi's submissive mindset and unwavering commitment to the ideal of pativrata are evident when she says "to live under spouse's insurance is the sanatana dharma for ladies. Spouse is god, he is salvation for ladies and he is the main asylum" (Kang). On the other side, Gandhari was selected as Dhritarashtra's wife despite the fact that she chose to intentionally blindfold herself as a show of sympathy with her husband, who was born blind. His love for Gandhari extended beyond her outward beauty, demonstrating his capacity to appreciate the underlying qualities and fortitude that she possessed. Gandhari, for her part, deliberately gave up her sight so that she might participate in the world of darkness that her husband inhabited. This gesture of empathy and loyalty is a witness to the great love that characterized their relationship as well as the sacrifices that they made for one another. Their unbreakable bond, in spite of the difficulties they encountered during their reign, serves as an illustration of the level of love that is still possible despite the intricacies of life and the situations one finds oneself in. Parbhati Mukherjee in her book *Hindu Women: Normative Models* talks about the marital relations in the *Mahabharata*,

The keen and lively interest they evinced in their surroundings and also the part played by the former two in the management of their respective realms, the strong sense of duty, love and loyalty to their respective husbands as shown by Kunti, Mandodari and Shakuntala, the carving for knowledge as expressed by Maitreyi. (49)

Husbands are commonly anticipated to fulfil the roles of providers, protectors, and guides for their families, while exemplifying the values of dharma (duty) and maintaining moral integrity in popular epics. In contrast, wives are portrayed as individuals who provide assistance to their husbands, manage domestic affairs, and foster the well-being of the family unit. In various depictions, they are frequently presented as embodiments of resilience and sagacity. The *Mahabharata* emphasizes the significance of reciprocal reverence and collaboration among marital partners, elucidating the notion that by fulfilling their designated tasks and responsibilities, they actively contribute to the welfare of both the family unit and the broader society. The characters shown in the *Mahabharata* embody these values, so illustrating the significance of maintaining equilibrium and unity in conjugal partnerships as a method to promote dharma and moral rectitude. During one portion of their time spent in exile, the Pandavas, who included Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, pretended to be Brahmins so that they may find refuge in the kingdom of Matsya. During a clash

at their landlord's house, they heard, "The first duty of a married man is to protect his wife. I should indeed be a pitiful sinner if I lived after giving you up to the Rakshasa, sacrificing both love and duty" (Rajgopalachari 32).

In the epic *The Mahabharata*, there is a scene that takes place during Arjuna and Subhadra's time spent in exile that tells a moving story about love, devotion, and the unbreakable link that exists between a husband and wife. Arjuna's wife, Subhadra, stayed at his side during his time in exile, but she did so not out of obligation but because of the profound love they shared for one another. Not only did her presence provide Arjuna with a source of strength and encouragement, but it also acted as an example of her 'pati-varta', which is the devotion that a wife has to her husband. The resilience of Subhadra and Arjuna's marriage was displayed by the fact that they chose, despite threats and difficulties, for Subhadra to remain by Arjuna's side. This incident is recognised as an outstanding manifestation of pati-varta in the *Mahabharata* because it is a tribute to the sacrifices and dedication that couples may make to fulfil their dharma and honour their love, even in the most trying circumstances. In addition, this episode is a testament to the sacrifices and dedication that spouses may make to honour their love. Arjuna had an unflinching dedication to the relationship with his wife, Subhadra. It was clear that he cared deeply for her and was devoted to her in the way that he protected and provided for her. Arjuna looked out for Subhadra's safety and wellbeing throughout their time in exile, despite the many obstacles they were forced to overcome. His dedication went as far as becoming a parent, as their marriage led to the delivery of their child, who they named Abhimanyu. His feeling of duty not only as a husband but also as a father was shown by the fact that he did this. Arjuna's chivalry, devotion, and his readiness to stand by Subhadra in times of misfortune and joy alike epitomise the spirit of pati dharma, which emphasises the value of love, loyalty, and care within a marital partnership. Additionally, Arjuna's willingness to stand by Subhadra in times of adversity and joy alike exemplifies the essence of pati dharma. Subhamoy Das, a reporter and feature story writer for Hindustan Times, a prominent media organisation in India writes in his article,

Hinduism is the religion that suggests methods for the attainment of the highest ideal and eternal bliss here and now on earth and not somewhere in heaven. For example, it endorses the idea that it is one's dharma to marry, raise a family and provide for that family in whatever way is necessary. The practice of dharma gives an experience of peace, joy, strength, and tranquillity within one's self and makes life disciplined. (Das)

After Rama was banished to the forest, his devoted wife Sita made the decision to follow him there, despite the difficult circumstances and unpredictability of their existence together in the natural environment. Her choice was an indication of the unwavering devotion she has for her husband. During their time in exile, they were confronted with a number of difficulties, one of which was the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana, ruler of the demons. Both Rama's determination to find Sita and her unflinching trust in him serve to underscore the power of their love for one another and the extent of their dedication to one another. Their reconciliation and victorious return to Ayodhya at the conclusion of their time spent in exile are symbolic of the triumph of love and dharma over hardship. The narrative of Rama and Sita's exile serves as a timeless emblem of marital commitment and the eternal ability of love to triumph over even the most challenging of circumstances.

In the epic *Mahabharata*, Bhima, one of the Pandava brothers, exemplified the principles of pati dharma, which refers to the obligations and commitments that come with being a spouse. The fact that he has never wavered in his devotion to Draupadi, his wife, is a striking illustration of the fact that he is dedicated to his position as a husband. Bhima's physical strength and valour were matched by his ferocious protection of Draupadi's honour and dignity, particularly after the tragic scene in the Kaurava court when she was publically humiliated. Bhima killed Dushashana because of long-standing enmity and a desire for retribution. In Hastinapura, Kaurava brother Dushasana helped disrobing Draupadi, the Pandavas' wife.

The way Bhima was killing Dussasana, he had made it a spectacle. Many had stopped fighting and were watching. Among them were Duryodhana, Karna, Sakuni, the Pandavas, Krishna, and many, many terrified warriors of both sides. One can easily imagine the feelings of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. (Patnaik)

Bhima's unshakable sense of responsibility as a husband was underscored by the unwavering commitment, he made to seek retribution for the wrong that had been done to his wife. In addition, Bhima's assistance was not limited to Draupadi; it was also extended to the rest of the family. During the time that his brothers and their spouses were living in exile, Bhima was an essential factor in the provision of sustenance and protection of these individuals. Bhima is a significant character because of his fidelity, respect and commitment to the principles of dharma in the process of fulfilling his pati dharma. These qualities are reflective of the virtues of responsibility and devotion that are praised throughout the *Mahabharata*.



When Rama selflessly accompanied Sita into exile and ensured her safety and well-being despite the difficult conditions of living in the forest, the extent of his sense of duty was brought to its zenith. His devotion to her was shown further by the fact that he adamantly followed Sita and rescued her from the demon king Ravana. This action was a demonstration of his dedication to upholding Sita's honour. Even in the face of severe challenges, Rama maintained his steadfast commitment, integrity, and dedication to dharma. This exemplifies the lasting value of pati dharma in Hindu society, which emphasizes the significance of a husband's love, support and devotion to his wife. Similarly, In the *Mahabharata*, Yudhishtira's unwavering commitment to dharma shines through during the dice game and its aftermath. Despite being deceitfully manipulated into losing his kingdom, wealth, and even Draupadi, he accepted the consequences with humility and grace, choosing to honour his word rather than retaliate. His decision to endure thirteen years of exile alongside his brothers and Draupadi, facing immense hardship without complaint, further underscores his dedication to righteousness.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The profound interaction that exists between love and dharma within the context of the institution of marriage serves as an evergreen reminder of the complexity that are inherent in human relationships, and it is shown in both of the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The unflinching love and commitment that Lord Rama and Sita share throughout the course of the *Ramayana* serve as a model for the kind of love that is guided by dharma. Despite the many challenges they face, they remain steadfast in their devotion to one another. In a similar vein, the story of the *Mahabharata* emphasizes the significance of upholding dharma within the context of a matrimonial relationship by highlighting the dedication of the Pandavas to their wife Draupadi as well as their unwavering commitment to doing what is right in spite of the challenges they faced. The lessons that may be learned from these legendary accounts include the fact that love in marriage is more than just a feeling; rather, it is a sacred obligation that is founded on moral and ethical principles and has the potential to bring about lasting happiness and peace. They continue to motivate and shed light on the way to a life that is both rewarding and meaningful after marriage, and they remind us that love and dharma are inseparable components of the epic adventure that is matrimony.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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