



## Significance of Dharma in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram*

R. Prathisha, Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University,  
Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3360-5583>

Dr. S. Ayyappa Raja, Associate Professor of English, Department of English, Annamalai University,  
Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1050-3339>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12628296

### Abstract

*Mythology consists of myths relating to sacred stories of a particular culture. These stories deal with a wide range of topics such as morality, the origin of humanity, cultural values, traditions, the purpose of life and so on. They also recount the tales of Gods and other supernatural beings. Indian mythology is a vast collection of tales that revolve around celestial and human beings. These are documented in Hindu scriptures like the Vedic literature and the Puranas. Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two ancient and well-known epics of India. These epics are not mere ancient tales of kingship and warfare, but also an effective medium used to emphasize the value of upholding dharma. Indian mythology has become the prime component among many contemporary Indian writers who have used widely mythological characters and incidents in their works. Devdutt Pattanaik is an Indian mythologist, speaker, illustrator, columnist and author of more than fifty books. Some of his important works are My Gita, Jaya, Sita, Shyam, The Book of Ram and Yama and his Book of Accounts. His works deal with the areas of religion, mythology and management. The present study aims at an analysis of "The Book of Ram" of Devdutt Pattanaik to highlight the significance of upholding dharma in one's life. It depicts how Ram has lived his life on a righteous path even in difficult circumstances. Ram is the symbol of morality and dharma and is thus known as "Maryada Purushottama." Throughout his life, he consistently follows dharma in all the roles he has assumed whether it is being a son, a husband, a brother, an enemy, and a King. The author provides a novel perspective about Ramayana by narrating the life of Ram as a person who has lived for others.*

**Keywords:** Devdutt Pattanaik, *The Book of Ram*, Puranas, *Ramayana*, Ram, Dharma.

### Introduction

Indian Mythology has emerged as a prominent theme among the several contemporary Indian writers who have extensively incorporated mythological characters and incidents in their works. "From early on the special importance of Indian mythology was perceived in its great antiquity and its extraordinary continuity, so that its ideas and gods can be observed in 'statu nascendi' and its stages of development over millennia can be traced up to the present." (Horsch 423) Devdutt Pattanaik is an Indian mythologist, speaker, illustrator, columnist and author of more than fifty books. Some of his important works are *My Gita*, *Jaya*, *Sita*, *Shyam*, *The Book of Ram* and *Yama and his Book of Accounts*. His works deal with the areas of religion, mythology and management. The present study aims at an analysis of *The Book of Ram* of Devdutt Pattanaik to highlight the significance of upholding dharma in one's life.

The term 'myth' is derived from the Greek word "mythos" which means stories that



are transmitted orally. Mythology is a collection of myths of a particular cultural group. M.H. Abrams and Harpham describe mythology as “a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 230). These narratives explore various themes such as good vs evil, the origin of humanity, cultural values, traditions, the purpose of life and so on. Such tales are often about Gods and other celestial beings. These mythological stories usually deal with the stories of the distant past. Academicians and Historians consider these as subjects of debate and attempt to prove their factual accuracies. However, myths serve as an effective tool to teach moral values to mankind.

Indian mythology is a vast collection of tales that revolve around celestial and human beings. These are predominantly featured in religious texts like the Vedic literature and the Puranas. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the two ancient and well-known epics of India. These epics are not mere ancient tales of kingship and warfare, but also an effective medium used to emphasize the value of upholding dharma. Mythological stories effectively convey the essential message to people and guide them towards a peaceful and prosperous life. Indians especially Hindus consider that following their religion could provide a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. Spiritual values are essential for one’s liberation from worldly entanglements and the well-being of the soul, mind and body.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Dharma is a key concept in Indian philosophy and literature. It encompasses the duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues, and the right way of living of an individual in this mortal life. Its importance is intensely rooted in the cultural traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. In the Hindu concept, dharma is the moral law with spiritual discipline that guides an individual's life. *The Ramayana* is one of the major two epics of ancient India. It is a sacred epic where the concept of dharma is explored in the life of Rama and Sita. Rama is the protagonist of the epic who is an epitome of dharma. His actions demonstrate the principles of righteousness and moral duty in life. Devdutt Pattanaik is a contemporary Indian author very much known for his works on ancient Indian myths and epics. He has reinterpreted the myths and epics as novel narratives to make them accessible to modern audiences to imbibe the ancient didactic values. Pattanaik offers a retelling of the *Ramayana* in his "The Book of Ram" with a focus on the concept of dharma connecting its relevance in the miserable contemporary times. Sneha Tripathi & Dr. Tejal Jani say, “By reinterpreting myths from revered classics and folklores, Devdutt explores the mysterious nature of humans. He clarifies and elucidates the root cause of traditions and taboo practices in India even today. The persona of Gods and Goddess is both feared and worshipped in India when they are seen as mortal men and women.” (265) Hence, this article takes up a study on the significance of dharma in Pattanaik’s *The Book of Ram*.

### **Literature Review**

Koller, J. M. (1972) in the work "Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order" explored dharma as a manifestation of universal order and its role in maintaining cosmic balance. This work provides a philosophical background that can be juxtaposed with Pattanaik’s interpretation.

Hiltebeitel, A. (2001 a) in the article "Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King" focused on the *Mahabharata* by eliciting an examination of dharma’s complexities and contradictions offers insights applicable to the



### *Ramayana.*

Sharma, A. (2000) in the book "Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction" provided an overview of classical Hindu thought, including an in-depth analysis of dharma, which can be instrumental in understanding Pattanaik's modern interpretations.

Pattanaik, D. (2010) in his novel "The Book of Ram" gives a focus for dharmic analysis wherein Pattanaik's reinterpretation of Ramayana by highlighting the role of dharma in the context of contemporary issues.

John Brockington (2004) in the article "The Concept of Dharma in The Ramayana" examined how Rama's adherence to dharma and its implications for modern ethical and moral dilemmas have been portrayed in *The Ramayana*.

### **Dharma in *The Book of Ram***

In *The Book of Ram*, Devdutt Pattanaik portrays how Ram has lived his life on a righteous path even in adverse conditions. Ram is the symbol of morality and dharma and he is known as "Maryada Purushottama." Throughout his life, he consistently upholds dharma in every role he has assumed whether it is being a son, a husband, a brother, an enemy, and a King. The author presents a new perspective on the epic *Ramayana* by deviating from the conventional narrative of Ram and instead focusing on Ram's selfless existence for others. Some of the instances in the epic display the selfless and righteous deeds of Ram.

For instance, the King of Ayodhya, Dashratha has declared his son Ram as the future King. At this moment, one of the wives, Kaikeyi, on the persuasion of her maidservant, Manthara, asks for the older promise that her husband has made. She demands that Ram should go into exile for fourteen years and that her son Bharata should be made the King. Dashratha struggles and hesitantly orders Ram's exile. The author opines, "Ram leaves Ayodhya, not because it is his destiny and not because it is his desire, but because it is his duty" (*The Book of Ram* 33). Without much hesitation, Ram accepts the order because it is his dharma to honour his father's old promise and leaves for the forest. Ram does not worry about leaving the luxurious life in the palace or the struggles of survival in the forest. According to Hinduism, the dharma of a son is to obey and respect his parents by being considerate, polite, and following their orders. This act of Ram shows his unflinching nature of following dharma as a dutiful and devoted son.

Ram, being a hermit, is required to maintain a state of celibacy. In the wilderness, sexual behaviour is driven by instinct, whereas in human society, it is influenced by both emotions and intellect. In the forest, he observes birds and animals involved in mating publicly. However, as a result of the pledge he has undertaken, he is obligated to lead a life of renunciation. Ram maintains dharma by keeping up his promise. Ram's actions exemplify his unwavering commitment to upholding dharma as an individual. Another episode illustrates Ram's quality of modesty. After the war between Ram and Ravana, Ram approaches the injured Ravana on his deathbed to acquire knowledge from him, as he is the son of a Rishi and a highly knowledgeable scholar. Ram requests, "Noble king of the Rakshasas, for the crime you committed against me you have been punished. I have no feelings towards you at this moment. Only great regard for your wisdom. I, seated at your feet as a student, humbly request you to share your knowledge with me" (*The Book of Ram* 120). Ram sits near the feet of Ravana as a student like a disciple sitting beside the Guru's feet. He requests Ravana to impart his wisdom to him. Amused by the humble act of Ram, Ravana teaches him the greater lessons of life. As an enemy, Ram has done the duty of punishing Ravana for the crime he has perpetrated against him. He holds neither hatred nor anger towards Ravana rather he has immense respect for his wisdom. Ram sees Ravana as an individual for what he



stands for and not as his enemy at the end. This episode reveals the humbleness of Ram and his upright act. From the analysis, the readers could understand the importance of upholding virtue in one's life. Ram has acted as a dutiful son, a celibate to the core and a great person of humility and nobility under different circumstances. Devdutt Pattanaik has adeptly presented the significance of upholding dharma in one's life with the illustration of Ram in *Ramayana*.

### Conclusion

Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram* offers a thoughtful search for dharma. It highlights the enduring significance of guiding human conduct and moral decision-making in mortal life to defeat adharma. By doing a reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*, Pattanaik highlights dharma, which is deeply rooted in the ancient tradition of ancient India. It remains a fundamental and pertinent concept in addressing modern moral challenges of life. His work not only rejuvenates the interest in traditional Indian literature but also provides a coherent framework to understand and apply the age-old wisdom in today's difficult world where dharma is vanishing. *The Book of Ram* positions dharma as a vibrant and pliable framework that will apply to modern life to evade many problems. The novel also reinterprets the trials and tribulations faced by Rama and emphasizes dharma as a principle of ethical living that transcends all time. Pattanaik has demonstrated that dharma is a living tradition and encourages his readers to consider how the moral lessons from the *Ramayana* can transform personal lives from crises and could help to develop societal values.

### References

- [1] Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Cengage Learning, New Delhi, 2015.
- [2] Hildebeitel, Alf. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001a.
- [3] Horsch, Paul. "From Creation Myth to World Law: the Early History of Dharma," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Dec 2004, Vol. 32, Issue 5-6, 423-448.
- [4] John Brockington. "The Concept of Dharma in The Ramayana." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 32: 655–670, 2004.
- [5] Koller, J. M. "Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order." *Philosophy East and West*, 22(2), 1972, pp. 131-144.
- [6] Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Book of Ram*. Penguin Random House, 2008.
- [7] Sharma, A. "Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction." Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [8] Sneha Tripathi & Dr. Tejal Jani "Devdutt Pattanaik's Exploration of Myth," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, March 2020, Vol. 7, No.1, pp. 262-266.

**Author (s) Contribution Statement:** Nil

**Author (s) Acknowledgement:** Nil

**Author (s) Declaration:** I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.