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– *Gautam Chikermane*
(Senior Journalist & Author)

‘Amish is a literary phenomenon.’

– *Anil Dharker*
(Senior Journalist & Author)

AMISH

& BHAVNA ROY



DHARMA

DECODING THE EPICS
FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE



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*To Bhavna's husband & Amish's brother-in-law,
the late Himanshu Roy.*

*Many speak of noble ideals,
few live them,
and very few inspire those they leave behind
to be better than they are.
Himanshu was one such noble soul.*

*We try, every day, to follow his path.
We hope that when we meet him again,
we don't disappoint him.*





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INTRODUCTION

Both of us, brother and sister, had a unique privilege in our upbringing. We were immersed in two worlds.

The first was Bharat, this blessed land whose ancient roots sink deep and from which we seek inspiration. We were raised in a deeply traditional household steeped in our culture, religion (primarily Hinduism, but also Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism), scriptures and rituals. Our paternal grandfather, Pandit Babulal Sunderlal Tripathi, was a Sanskrit scholar who taught math and physics in Kashi, at the Banaras Hindu University. Our maternal grandmother, Smt. Shankar Devi Mishra, was a teacher in Gwalior and also a scholar of scripture and tradition. The long shadows cast by these two remarkable individuals continue to influence our family. They keep us rooted.

There was also another influence, of India, a land

playing catch up with the world, with modernity and Western-style liberalism, in pursuit of which it often imitated the UK, and later the USA. Our parents were raised in a Hindi-speaking milieu, both at home and in school. And they suffered for it. Lack of proficiency in English was a debilitating limitation in getting good jobs and achieving career progression, especially in an economy laid waste by socialist policies. Our parents decided that their children would not endure what they had. We are four siblings, and we were all packed off to the most elite educational institutions of the time. It was a stretch, since it was way beyond their social and economic means. However, our mother was determined, as she said, to ensure that her children grew up around the *angrezi-waalas*, so that we would not ever be intimidated by them. It was especially important to her that her children succeed in this new world.

Thanks to our education in elite boarding and day schools, we grew up with an insider's view of the anglicised India of the time. It had its strengths. It had its beauty. It certainly had panache. But there was a subtle denigration of the Hindu way of life, which often angered us. We kept quiet though, as our mother had advised us to. She would often quote Lord Krishna to us, and one of the lessons we learnt from the Lord was: 'Pick your battles with wisdom. Fight from a position

of strength.’ She also exhorted us to recognise that there is something to be learnt from everyone and everything, even from those who denigrate your way of life.

So we learnt to straddle the two worlds. Shakespeare in school, Kalidasa at home. George Bernard Shaw in school, Mahabharata and Ramayana at home. Johann Sebastian Bach in school, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi at home. The Bible in school, the Gita and the Upanishads at home. The Beatles and Lata Mangeshkar, both at school and home! We boisterously lived the Western life in school and fervently practised our rituals at home. Our education prepared us for life in the modern world but taught us almost nothing of our own traditions. These, we learnt at home. From our elders, who kept the flame of our ancient culture alive within us.

India is the only surviving pre-Bronze Age civilisation; we are still vibrantly alive. Every other pre-Bronze Age civilisation is dead, existing only as lifeless shells within the walls of museums and academia today. Our ancestors protected and kept alive that which is most precious: our culture. Often, they did so by fighting off brutal foreign invaders. Most importantly, they passed the flame forward. From generation to generation. In an unbroken chain. We too must pass the torch forward. To the next generation.

We recall reading somewhere: ‘Traditions are not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.’

This book is the first of many in which we reflect upon and discuss different facets of Indian culture. Some we can learn from, some we can adapt, and some we must let go of.

We have not followed the usual, modern style of non-fiction books, which are built upon a hypothesis and then backed up with references to support that hypothesis. This style, we believe, leads to adversarial tribalism, even among scholars. This is evident in debates in which scholars often strive to prove loyalty to ‘their tribe’ and attack those on the opposite side, instead of honestly seeking the truth with an open mind. These debates generate more heat than light.

We have followed the ancient Indian Upanishadic style of conversations which present different views, even contrarian views. We have tried our best to not make the lessons we draw from these prescriptive, only suggestive. For you must make up your own mind.

You might ask, why dharma? Don’t we understand the concept by now? But dharma is quite the Scarlet Pimpernel among words. Difficult to pin down, it is invisible to the eye and confounding in the extreme. Shift the definition just a little, and it slides into another meaning. Yet, it is the universe within which Indian philosophy nestles.

Our endeavour in this series of books will be to find and explore multiple strands that lead to the dharmic

centre. We have embedded these explorations in a fictional setting, with a repeating cast of characters, each of whom has stories to tell. We hope that over the years, Gargi and Nachiket, Anirban and Valli, Lopamudra and Dharma Raj, and a few others still waiting in the wings, will come alive in your minds, as they have in ours. Perhaps you will identify with one or the other, or several of them, at various stages in your own evolving relationship with the epics and the stories they tell. Our interpretations are also moored to some other, more modern interpretations of these stories. Amish's Meluhan universe flows alongside and intersects the popular version of the Mahabharata today, to together serve as the soil from which we attempt to extract an understanding of ethics, morality, compassion, rigour, restraint, aspiration, wisdom and many other imponderables. The biggest lesson might well be that there are many paths to wisdom, and it is possible for each of us to find our fit without compromising another's.

Lastly, it must be stated with humility that we are not experts. We do not have the brilliance of our babaji and naniji. Indeed, of your babaji or naniji either.

The flame of reflection has grown weaker in our generation. The blessings of Goddess Lakshmi have increased dramatically, but Goddess Saraswati's grace is

not as easily bestowed. And yet, this is a sincere effort. We are hoping to pass on a torch to you. Hold it aloft and run with it. And, if you find it worthy, pass it on.

Mother India is special. The only one with an unbroken chain, with roots extending back to the dawn of human civilisation. Let's keep the flame alive. For the more we share it, the more it will grow. And all of us can benefit from ancient India's light.

अपूर्वो कोऽपि कोशोऽयं विद्यते तव भारति ।
व्ययतो वृद्धिमायाति क्षयमायाति सञ्चयात् ॥

(Apoorvah kopi koshoayam vidyate tav Bharati,
Vyayato vrudhim aayaati kshyam aayaati sanchayaat.)

*My Goddess Saraswati, your treasure is unique,
It grows when spent and reduces when hoarded.*

Note: Sources referred to in the main body of the text, which is structured as conversations among a fictional group of characters, are listed in the Select Bibliography at the end of the book.

1

WHAT IS KARMA ANYWAY?





Nachiket grabbed the keys from the mantelpiece with one hand as he stuffed his mouth with the remains of an omelette sandwich with the other. His work bag almost knocked over a flower vase, which was placed on the console near the entrance. Gargi shrieked. Steadying the vase, Nachiket yanked open the door.

‘Visit Baba on your way back. You haven’t seen him for five days now,’ said Gargi.

‘Okay. Bye.’

He glanced at his watch as he ran down the stairs. Ten minutes to nine. *I won’t make it. Lord Shiva help me!*

He jumped on his bike and revved the engine. Almost skidding on a loose tile, he spun onto the road. *I’m gonna be roasted.*

Nachiket Anant Sawant was a sous-chef. He worked at the oddly named Hotel Ego in Shivaji Nagar. He lived in Baner, not too far from the hotel. But Pune traffic was usually insane.

Shockingly, the road was free. He steadied his breath

and settled into a comfortable ride. Within minutes, he was at the hotel. He parked his bike in the compound at the back. 9.10 a.m. *Phew.*

Good karma!



It was seven in the evening when Nachiket turned onto the leafy Prabhat Road. His hand flew reflexively to his chest as he passed the Ganesh temple on the side of the road. He turned into the second lane on the right and slowed as he reached the last bungalow at the end of the lane. He brought the bike to a halt in front of the rickety wooden gate. Getting off, he pushed open the gate, straightening the nameplate on the side before going through. *Dharma Raj Deshpande.* Nachiket smiled to himself as he parked the bike under the neem tree and stepped onto the veranda.

‘Ketu? *Aalas ka, baala?* Is that you, child?’

Nachiket halted at the main door and turned his head toward the beloved voice of his father-in-law. The old man sat on a swing at the far end of the veranda. Nachiket walked up to him.

‘*Namaskar karto, Baba.*’ Nachiket touched his feet, then sank into a cane chair, a sigh of exhaustion escaping his lips.

‘Tough day?’ Baba’s voice was soft.

‘Hmmm ... Karma!’

‘Karma, is it? How so?’

Nachiket was nonplussed. ‘I don’t know. I just said it!’

‘Hmmm. Okay.’ Dharma Raj took off his reading glasses and leaned back, rubbing his nose.

Nachiket’s eyes fell on the book in Dharma Raj’s hand. *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*. ‘Gargi is reading that same book. And I finished it just last week. Is that why you are thinking of karma today? What exactly is karma anyway? What was Raavan’s karma?’

Dharma Raj: ‘Very impactful, evidently. It’s been a while and we’re still talking about him!’

Nachiket laughed.

Dharma Raj: ‘What do you think? What was his karma? Was he a victim or was his life a consequence of karma?’

‘Both, maybe?’

Dharma Raj sat back, one arm stretched over the cushions at the back. ‘Hmmm ... How tired are you?’

‘Why?’

‘I was thinking ... How serious an answer do you want?’

Nachiket sat up straight. His tiredness dissipated like magic. *We are going to talk. Yes!*

Baba read his mind. ‘Go ask Aai for two cups of tea. If possible, some bhajis. Let’s fix the setting first!’

As Nachiket rose, Dharma Raj quipped, ‘And, if you can manage it, her exalted presence too!’

Nachiket laughed as he walked indoors to greet his mother-in-law.



Minutes later, he walked back and settled down on the floor cushion under the window. At his guru’s feet. ‘Tell me, Baba. What is karma?’

‘What does it mean to you?’ Dharma Raj countered.

‘Good begets good. Bad begets bad,’ Nachiket said. ‘Although that does seem like I am stating the obvious.’

His father-in-law frowned. ‘Don’t be flippant. What is good? What is bad? Huh?’

Nachiket shrugged. ‘You tell me.’

‘Karma is activity. Action. To do.’

‘Good and bad action, both?’

Dharma Raj was silent, as if thinking about what to say next. But Nachiket knew better.

‘All right, Ketu, tell me. Was Liu Xiaobo a good man? Of good karma?’

For a moment, Nachiket was thrown. What did the Chinese dissident have to do with karma, good or bad?

He said, 'I don't know. But thank God he got the Nobel Prize before he died. The man spent his life in prison for his principles, his convictions ...' His voice trailed away.

Dharma Raj smiled. 'All he wanted to do was to rid his country of the Communist Party of China, the CPC.' 'Yes!' Nachiket exclaimed.

Dharma Raj: 'Do you know that the CPC has raised more than 680 million people out of poverty in the last thirty years? How much of an impact has Liu Xiaobo had on the world, in real terms? Or even on the Chinese people?'

Nachiket: 'So, what you are saying is, Xiaobo may not be "good" and the CPC may not actually be "bad"?''

Dharma Raj: 'The CPC is a political party driven by one purpose only: to seek power and remain in power. In this case, over the Chinese nation.'

'Sometimes it seems like the CPC wants to rule the entire world!' Nachiket ventured. 'So, judging by intentions, Xiaobo's karma is good. However, by outcome, the CPC's karma is better because it pulled so many Chinese people out of poverty. But what about Dr Li Wenliang then, the whistleblower? Or this Wuhan coronavirus for that matter, which the CPC has unleashed on the world, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and massive economic destruction? They've

pretty much wiped out their good karma points, I'd say!

Dharma Raj continued as if he had not heard him, 'So many organisations are more about sustaining themselves than eradicating a problem or achieving a goal. Anti-addiction centres, women's support organisations ... Ever noticed that? Not all NGOs, not the ones I admire! But many. It appears that anti-poverty and climate change efforts are best conducted at conferences these days. The fancier the location, the more sincere the effort!'

Nachiket smiled. He enjoyed his Baba's dry wit. Sardonic, but never cynical. He could make you laugh at yourself without ever mocking you. He said, 'Baba, you didn't answer my question about Dr Li Wenliang. Or the coronavirus.'

'I don't want to. It will take us towards sociopolitics, and I wouldn't want to do that in the absence of our wives. Leave world politics for another day.'

'Okay.'

Dharma Raj: 'Speaking of ineffective organisations, some of the best people I know are the do-nothing-talk-amazing types. The wonderful tribe of fence sitters! Beginning with me! And, mind you, some fence sitters have a particular penchant for passing judgments! How long does one wait to evaluate outcomes, anyway?'

Nachiket: 'I'm really confused now. How does one judge?'

Dharma Raj tossed his first challenge. 'Why judge? Why not just understand?'

Nachiket: 'But how?'

Dharma Raj: 'By understanding karma's relationship with dharma.'

Nachiket: 'Woah ... it's the deep end now!'

Dharma Raj: 'What do you mean?'

Dharma Raj was a retired police officer. A celebrated officer with a reputation for toughness and large-heartedness. Nachiket often felt as if he was being tested by him. And he was never sure whether he had failed or passed.

'I don't know, Baba,' he said now. 'I don't know what I mean. Tell me. What is dharma?'

Dharma Raj: 'Have you heard of Icarus?'

Nachiket: 'Yes. James Bond. *Die Another Day*.'

Dharma Raj: '*Na re!* No, no! Let me tell you a story. An old story.'

Nachiket: 'From ancient India?'

Dharma Raj: 'No. Ancient Greece.'

'All right.' Nachiket leaned back against the wall. He loved listening to Baba's stories.