

Reconstructing Dharma: Narrative Dialogue of Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain Ethics in S. L. Bhyrappa's *Sartha*

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Abstract: This study examines the connection between S. L. Bhyrappa's historical novel *Sartha* (*The Caravan*) and the intersection of Vedic ritualism, Buddhist renunciation, and Jain asceticism in eighth-century India. It was a period marked by profound philosophical turmoil and intense religious competition. Through an analysis of *Sartha* and a comparative study with classical texts such as Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa's *Ślokaṽrttika*, the Buddhist Pali Canon, and the Jain Āgamas, the research demonstrates that Bhyrappa presents Dharma as a dynamic, fluid, and contested category rather than an orthodox code of conduct. The research asserts that the caravan in the novel serves as a metaphor for an arena where various philosophies interact, debate, and sometimes clash, mirroring the history of different religions in India. Hence, by making contemporary issues relevant in the modern era, the paper illuminates how literature functions as a bridge between historical consciousness and modern ethical discourse.

Keywords: *Carvan, Bhyrappa, Philosophy, Jainism, Dharma.*

1. INTRODUCTION

S. L. Bhyrappa, one of India's most renowned novelists, is recognised for seamlessly integrating philosophical inquiry, historical reconstruction, and psychological depth into his works. Using Kannada as a primary language, Bhyrappa engages with themes like metaphysics, ethics, cultural memory, and the intersection of history and human experience. Moreover, unlike some authors who treat history merely as a backdrop, Bhyrappa approaches it as a dynamic space in which the past is reinterpreted to address modern concerns (Halbfass, 1988). His novels, such as *Parva*, *Aavarana*, and *Sartha*, engage with notions of identity and moral complications (Ramaswamy, 1997).

However, the story of *Sartha* (*The Caravan*) unfolds during a period of profound religious, philosophical, and socio-political transition. It was published in 1978, but set in eighth-century India. It was an era that witnessed a battle of views, where Vedic orthodoxy, Buddhist renunciation, and Jain asceticism coexisted in a delicate balance, each aiming for authority (Olivelle, 2004). Bhyrappa dramatises this turmoil through the metaphor of a caravan, similar to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, as a transportable collective of diverse individuals whose physical journey mirrors the intellectual and ethical journey of the country. In addition, the eighth century marked a decline in Buddhist monasteries, particularly at Nalanda University, which had been a hub of Buddhist scholarship for centuries. It is well known that Nalanda University was established in the Gupta period and attracted scholars from across Asia. It also facilitated the exchange of ideas and served as a hub for Buddhist philosophy.

However, with time, Buddhist institutions grew strained due to internal differences and challenges posed by the rise of Hindu philosophical schools, such as Advaita Vedanta. In *Sartha*, this decline in the influence of Buddhist ideas is depicted through scenes of philosophical debates and the collapse of monastic infrastructure, which symbolise the fragile state of ideas once dominant (Deshpande, 2023). Following the decline of Buddhism, the eighth century witnessed the emergence of Advaita Vedanta, led by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (Śaṅkara). Vedanta philosophy emphasised the identity of Brahmand (ultimate reality) and Ātman (self). It challenged both orthodox ritualism and Buddhist metaphysics. In

Sartha, the character of Śaṅkara appears not just as a historical figure but also as a dynamic person whose sharp intellect is dramatised through his debate with Māṇḍana Mīśra (Deshpande, 2023). By fictionalising such encounters, Bhyrappa allows readers to witness philosophical revolutions through their own eyes, not just as a historical event.

Another important aspect of India's religious landscape is evident in the presence of Jain monasteries in the novel. Jainism, with its unwavering commitment to *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *aparigraha* (non-attachment), and asceticism, offers a spiritual path that rejects both ritualistic Vedic philosophy and Buddhist ethics (Dundas, 2002). Jain monks used to travel along the same trade routes as merchants, spreading their teachings and establishing communities. Their role in *Sartha* highlights the diversity of India's spiritual landscape. Meanwhile, it also raises tensions between spiritual ideals and social and economic demands. Through these characters, Bhyrappa explores how Jain ethics are both similar to and different from the ambitions of traders and rulers.

To give shape to his narrative, Bhyrappa employs the motif of a caravan. The protagonist of the novel, Nagbhatta, travels with the caravan, which propels his physical and philosophical journey. Caravans have been hubs of interaction throughout history, facilitating the flow of people, products, and ideas over long distances. In this sense, *Sartha* becomes a microcosm of society, where moral principles are reflected in business dealings, travel, and social interactions. The struggles of the characters over money, power, and religious duty highlight how materiality influences philosophical discourse and show the relationship between ethics and economy.

Hence, the caravan becomes a symbol for examining how philosophical traditions interact and sometimes even transcend their boundaries. Through this setting, Bhyrappa reconstructs *Dharma* not as a strict code but as a dynamic process, eternally being shaped by historical circumstances and agency. In doing so, *Sartha* also discusses the issues of pluralism, religious coexistence, and ethical negotiation in modern India. As Wilhelm Halbfass argues, Indian philosophy must be understood as a tradition of "dialogue and contestation," and not as a repository of doctrines (Halbfass, 1988).

However, most existing scholarship on *Sartha* has already addressed its aesthetics, female archetypes, and historical reconstruction; it frequently analyses the Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain elements of the novel as cultural background rather than philosophy, discussing ethics comparatively (Ramaswamy, 1997). Additionally, no work links *Sartha*'s narrative with the reconstruction of *Dharma* within each of these three traditions. This project aims to fill that gap through textual analysis, intellectual history, and narrative ethics, demonstrating how Bhyrappa utilises the medium of fiction to mediate disputes for modern readers and contribute to both Dharma Studies and comparative religious ethics. The present paper supports this claim by demonstrating the relevance of these historical debates for contemporary Dharma Studies.

2. Classical Concept of Dharma

Dharma was perceived in various ways by classical Indian traditions. In the Vedic tradition, *Dharma* was closely associated with the concept of household duties and social obligations (*varṇāśrama-dharma*) as well as the cosmic order (*ṛta*). This framework was noted in texts such as the *Manusmṛti* and *Bhagavad Gita*, which helped connect cosmic harmony with fulfilling one's social obligations. To illustrate Vedic ethics, the *Gita*, for example, famously states: "Better one's own dharma, though imperfect, than the dharma of another well performed" (Miller, 1986). The Mīmāṃsā school went one step further by defending ritual action (*karma*) as the core of *Dharma*. They posited that the authority of the Vedas ensured the moral and cosmic order in the universe.

Later, Buddhism arose, rejecting the authority of the Veda and ritualism by emphasising the concepts of impermanence of all phenomena (*anicca*), the transient nature of the self (*anatta*), and the path to liberation (*nirvāṇa*) through ethical living and meditation. It had a different view of *Dharma* altogether. The *Dhammapada* states that, "Not by rituals and vows, not by much learning does one become free, but by truth and by righteousness" (Buddha, 1990). Through this, Buddhism shifted the attention from ritual behaviour to the transformation of being.

Nevertheless, Jainism, which arose in a similar time period as early Buddhism, presents yet another ideology, of *Dharma* altogether. The *Tattvārthasūtra* states, "*ahiṃsā paramo dharmah*," or that non-violence is the highest *Dharma*. Through this, Jain philosophy advocates for non-possession (*aparigraha*) and promotes self-denial to an extreme (Dundas, 2002). Bhyrappa's *Sartha* illuminates the intersection of these ethical worlds, as the characters of Śaṅkara, Buddhist monks, Jain ascetics, and the caravan merchants embody competing ethical commitments to duty, renunciation, and liberation.

To understand how Bhyrappa reframes these traditions, it is helpful to draw on modern scholarship about *Dharma* and its new narrative mediation.

Modern studies have revealed that *Dharma* is constantly evolving and not a timeless or homogeneous category, as *Dharma* has meant very different things in different times, and in different contexts (Olivelle, 2004), and invites readers to view it as an evolving discourse shaped by political, religious, and cultural forces more than a static code. However, the rationality of *Dharma* in Indian philosophy is that *Dharma* involves moral reasoning, not blind subservience to customary convention (Matilal, 1998). For Matilal, classical Indian thinkers were engaged in normative debates, similar to moral debates in other cultures, which helps situate *Sartha* within the scope of comparative ethics, rather than purely Indological studies. Hence, Bhyrappa's *Sartha* transforms the classical plurality of *Dharma* into a moral inquiry. It demonstrates that across Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, *Dharma* has never been a fixed law, but rather a dynamic dialogue shaped by historical and philosophical conflicts (Olivelle, 2004).

3. Narrative as a Philosophical Medium

The very decision to use fiction to investigate *Dharma* is also important here. Martha Nussbaum, in her theory of narrative ethics, states that stories are not mere illustrations of moral principles; they are themselves modes of moral reasoning (Nussbaum, 1990). Instead of an abstract treatise, a narrative provides a medium to experience a moral problem and personally engage in ethical living through characters and events. While Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) also explores Buddhist and Hindu notions of renunciation and enlightenment through a fictional narrative (Nussbaum, 1990), critics note that the story simplifies the complexity of Indian thought for Western readers. Bhyrappa's *Sartha*, on the other hand, weaves philosophical arguments into the history of Śāṅkara's dialogues with Buddhists and Jains, as well as the existential suffering of travellers in caravans. This interaction between history and imagination allows *Sartha* to be referred to by Nussbaum as a "literary laboratory for moral thought" (Nussbaum, 1990).

4. Theoretical Framework

As discussed beforehand, analysing *Sartha* requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that contributes to an integrated method of analysis, weaving narrative ethnography, comparative philosophy, and postcolonial critique into a single lens. Not treating these approaches as separate forms of understanding, the framework used gathers these lenses to demonstrate how Bhyrappa's novel serves as a philosophical conversation in cultural reclamation of Indian philosophical history. This framework situates *Sartha* at a crossroads between classical ethical traditions, modern moral philosophy, and cultural epistemology, which will help understand how fiction can serve as a vehicle for ethical experimentation, philosophical conversation across cultures, and decolonial recovery.

The foundation of the study draws on narrative ethics, particularly as articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum. As MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue*, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal" (MacIntyre, 2007). For MacIntyre, ethical life cannot be measured in absolutes. Ethical life must take place in a narrative space, or a context, where characters act, deliberate, and confront conflicting moral values. Similarly, Nussbaum reminds us in *Love's Knowledge*, "the moral life is too complex to be captured by the abstract theories of philosophers; it demands the particularity, emotion, and imagination that only narrative can provide" (Nussbaum, 1990).

In *Sartha*, Bhyrappa visualises the context and brings forth a narrative. The caravan's pilgrimage brings together Vedic ritualists, monks, ascetics, traders, and wandering thinkers whose conversations dramatise the moral and metaphysical tensions of India in the eighth century. Rather than delivering one message, the novel preserves a diverse narrative space, allowing for multiple ethical systems to clash, cohabitate, and compete.

Although narrative ethics draws attention to the moral teachings of stories, comparative philosophy draws attention to how *Sartha* portrays philosophical dialogues across different traditions. As Wilhelm Halbfass states, we should read Indian thought as a participant in a broader intercultural conversation, not a closed system (Halbfass, 1988). Similarly, Ram-Prasad Chakravarthi insists that comparative philosophy should involve conceptual encounters where ideas travel across the boundary of history, culture, and language (Ram-Prasad, 2001).

Hence, *Sartha* emerges as an example of this spirit of dialogue. It recreates the debates between Mīmāṃsā scholars, Advaitins, Buddhists, and Jains from the eighth century, turning fiction into a space for engaging with comparative philosophy. The characters in the novel are not just an embodiment of their doctrines, but they are made to argue, critique, and challenge each other in a way that resembles a śāstric dispute.

The third component of the framework draws on postcolonial theory, primarily the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. *Sartha* also contributes to the restoration of Indigenous languages, which are on the verge of being erased after centuries of colonisation. Ngũgĩ, in *Decolonising the Mind*, expresses his concern over how colonialism imposes the domination of mental universes (Thiong'o, 1986), as local languages, texts, and philosophies are made obsolete in the face of European supremacy. Similarly, Santos recognises epistemicide, or the killing of knowledge systems, that has sustained non-Western cultures for centuries (Santos, 2014).

Through the reconstruction of the debates of Indian intellectuals in the eighth century, *Sartha* resists epistemicide. The novel surveys characters speaking radically, from Śaṅkara's Advaita to Buddhist, to Jain thinkers, ultimately recognised for either exotic spirituality or premodern stupidity in colonial historiography. Recognising its origins of colonial or Orientalist notions, Bhyrappa presents the workings of Indian philosophy placed in history with linguistic diversity and philosophical relevance, bringing Indian philosophy to life as a living intellectual sensibility.

Thus, the theoretical framework also positions *Sartha* as an act of reclamation. By combining ethics, philosophy, and postcolonial critique, the study interprets the novel as a space where moral inquiry, intercultural dialogue, and decolonial recovery come together. This framework enables a nuanced reading of the work, revealing how narrative art can bridge the gap between history and imagination.

5. Mapping the Ethical Systems in *Sartha*

As discussed, *Sartha* is a novel that illustrates pluralism of ethics in eighth-century India, dramatising the tensions among Vedic ritualism, Buddhist renunciation, and Jain asceticism. Among these, the first ethical system Bhyrappa presents in *Sartha* is Vedic ritualism built on the concept of ṛta (cosmic order). The Vedic view of the cosmos portrays society as a hierarchical and interdependent structure organised by *varṇāśrama-dharma*, the duties of one's caste (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). At the heart of the idea of *Dharma* is holding the cosmic and social order together through the performance of rituals and the maintenance of obligations towards one's caste.

Bhyrappa illustrates this through characters like temple priests, traditional Brahmin scholars, and caravan merchants, who view their style of labor not merely as an economic practice but as a devotion to the deities and the social order. For example, some caravan leaders insist on making ritual sacrifices before embarking on their journeys, as they believe that gaining the favor of the gods assures the safety and success of their endeavor. This invokes the rationale for action articulated by Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, who said that Vedic commands are *apauruṣeya*, as in they have no human author and are eternal (Bhaṭṭa, 1984). Under this view, the authority of the Veda maintains its own self-sufficiency and is independent of any human origin, placing ritual action into the realm of duty rather than ethics or belief.

Bhyrappa dramatises this logic in scenes where people who practice rituals rationally defend the needs of their actions, regardless of their economic hardships or political conditions. For example, a priest insists on continuing elaborate fire rituals during a famine, arguing that without yajña, the balance of heaven and earth collapses (Bhyrappa, 1998). This echoes the *Bhagavad Gita*'s assertion that yajña sustains the cycle of creation, from sacrifice comes rain, from rain food, and from food living beings" (Miller, 1986). At this point, the novel also recognises the connected threads of cosmology in ritualism, with the spiritual, social, and material framed together.

Additionally, Bhyrappa also illustrates the hierarchical and exclusionary aspects of this system. Lower caste caravan laborers are fundamental to the economic endeavor, but they aren't included in the rituals, and have full physical labor imposed upon them. This mirrors the Manusmṛti's inflexible codes of caste responsibilities, in which violating one's indoctrinated existence is a rupture of cosmic law. By highlighting opposing ideological bases, Bhyrappa invites us to understand how ritual authority can be oppressive, especially against ethical frameworks like the egalitarianism of Buddhism.

The philosophical conflict between supporters of Vedic ritualism and its critics is parallel to the historical conflicts between Mīmāṃsā thinkers like Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and the new schools of Vedānta and Buddhism. Kumārila's arguments for the agreement to Vedic injunctions recur in Bhyrappa's dialogues in which Brahmin intellectuals defend the rituals as not just authoritative structures in religion, but the very basis of *Dharma* itself. Yet within this dialogue that echoes through Kumārila's various theories about meaning, meaning is interrupted and questioned by Buddhist characters who push against the value of ritual action itself. This lays the grounds for conflict and ethical transformation.

Unlike ritualism's necessity of world order, Buddhist ethics in *Sartha* propose an entirely different vision that is based on renunciation, impermanence (*anicca*), and compassion (*karuna*). Bhyrappa places Buddhism in its context at Nalanda University, which by the eighth century was a thriving institution of intellectual and spiritual learning. The detailed descriptions of communal life, debates, and scholarly endeavors portray Buddhism as a field of dynamic ideas rather than a fixed tradition having a central governing principle.

The Buddhist characters in *Sartha* embody the ethical norms of the Pali Canon, particularly by recognising impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anatta*). These concepts disrupt the understanding of a stable cosmic order and eternal self (*atman*) as described in the Vedas. The *Dhammapada* asserts that all conditioned things are impermanent; when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering (Buddha, 1990). The novel incorporates understanding of the lives of monks who renounce the worldly life of shifting attachments and social hierarchies, practicing ways to liberate (*nirvana*) while remaining open to creation through compassion.

A salient example is a conversation between a Buddhist monk and a caravan merchant mourning the death of his family. The monk talks about his suffering (*dukkha*) in terms of impermanence, demonstrating compassion, not through ritual, but through the embodied practice of mindfulness and detachment. This tale illustrates an important therapeutic aspect of Buddhist ethics, one that comes in contrast to Vedic sacrifice.

At the same time, the novel also captures some of the institutional fragility of Buddhism during this historical moment. The decline of Nalanda, part of broader political and religious upheavals from other competing traditions, such as Advaita Vedānta, can be seen in the narrative's portrayal of Buddhist scholars challenging named foes, such as Śāṅkara, who, at times, seemed unprepared for the critique of their doctrines. In one scene, we witness a Vedāntin critique the Buddhist denial of self, arguing from the Upaniṣadic perspective that consciousness cannot be reduced to just a stream of impermanent events. This supports Śāṅkara's historical critiques, that the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* subverts the very possibility of liberation (Śāṅkara, 1996).

The third key ethical framework evident in *Sartha* is Jainism, which Bhyrappa illustrates as nothing less than inspiring and truly daunting. Jain ethics follow principles of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *aparigraha* (non-attachment), and radical asceticism. Jainism advocates for the elimination of all material attachments, unlike Buddhism, which has found a middle path through practices that include strict dietary restrictions, brutal self-denial, and even fasting to the point of death in the ritual of *sallekhanā*.

In the novel, Jain characters are represented as ascetics who invoke a sense of awe among the caravan people. Their presence represents a specific type of *Dharma*, one that is staunch in its demand for purity and *ahimsa*. In one example, a Jain monk refuses to walk even after sunset for fear he may injure an insect during his travels. It shows the imperative of *ahiṃsā*, and goes along with classical Jain texts like the Ācārāṅga Sūtra, which declares: "One who knows the suffering of all living beings and does not harm them is a sage".

In contrast to Vedic and Buddhist traditions, Jainism pushes toward withdrawal from worldly attachments. It is illustrated in the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (non-absolutism), which recognises the complexity of truth while demanding an uncompromising discipline from those who adhere to it.

Covering similar ground, the novel also considers the emotional elements of Jain ethics. In one particularly striking scene, a Jain monk advises a grieving mother to give up her attachment to her dead child, asserting that a direct attachment to impermanent relationships with living beings causes her suffering. While this is philosophically consistent with the Jain perspective, it strikes other characters as emotionally cruel advice. Thus, the novel highlights the emotional cost of extreme asceticism. It suggests that while Jain ethics encourage and promote purity in the world, they can also contribute to a detachment from human relationships, which are often the foundation of being human.

However, *Sartha* places the three systems, Vedic ritualism, Buddhist compassion, and Jain asceticism, alongside one another, creating a polyphonic account of *Dharma*. Each system is given philosophical depth as well as narrative empathy, but none of the traditions is romanticised. Instead, Bhyrappa asks readers to see the friction and dialogues among competing visions of ethical life representing the historical reality of eighth-century India. By observing these three systems, Bhyrappa stages the scene for reconsidering *Dharma* as a pluralist and flexible notion that cannot be contained within a single ideology. Through its richness and depth, *Sartha* invites us to think of ethical life as an ongoing dialogue among multiple voices, making it as relevant today as it would have been in the world of the caravan. (Thiong'o, 1986)

6. Reconstructing *Dharma* in the Contemporary Era

The historical distance of the novel offers a vantage point to examine how *Dharma* might function as a principle in a pluralistic society. It becomes evident that *Sartha* was written in a period of religious and ideological conflict marked by the optimism of nation-building and the trauma of partition. In this climate, *Dharma* became a politicised term, invoked alternately to justify communal identity or to promote universalism. However, Bhyrappa resists both these extremes. Rather than offering a realist portrayal of sectional tension, he turns to historical fiction to recover an even older era of intellectual openness, when India's moral traditions were diverse and in conversation. This approach resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call to "decolonise the mind" by keeping indigenous frameworks of thought and storytelling at the centre (Thiong'o, 1986).

The caravan can be read as a microcosm of the nation itself, containing Brahmins, merchants, ascetics, monks, and courtesans within its confines, all connected but divided by competing worldviews. In this sense, *Sartha* addresses questions of religious pluralism: how could a society avoid descending into homogenisation or sectional violence among several ethical systems? By dramatising the tensions in the caravan, Bhyrappa offers the reader a narrative laboratory that does not limit the possibilities of scenarios and dialogue.

Furthermore, Bhyrappa uses fiction to intervene in modern academic and political discourses that have limited the complexity of *Dharma*. As B. K. Matilal makes clear, *Dharma* in classical Indian thought was never simply about a set of legalistic rules but ways of context-sensitive moral reasoning (Matilal, 1998). In an increasingly polarised situation, where nationalistic *dharma* and fundamentalist religious commitments seem to dominate, Bhyrappa's complicated rendering brings balance.

Sartha is essentially repositioning *Dharma*. Rather than treating it as a fixed code transmitted through scriptures, Bhyrappa is portraying *Dharma* as a flux of negotiation that evolves through dialogue, conflict, and historical scenarios. The caravan is a potent metaphor of dynamic *Dharma*. As a group of travellers crosses geographic, cultural, and intellectual distances, they must continually respond to new circumstances. A ritual prohibition that seems absolute in one village, for example, may be either completely impractical or outright destructive in a different village: the complete prohibitions against certain kinds of food upheld by Brahmin merchants become impossible when the caravan passes through areas afflicted by famine. The characters are forced to decide whether they value ritual purity over their survival. These moments in the narrative exemplify the situational nature of *Dharma*, as Patrick Olivelle terms it, which indicates that rules are not universal and must be read through the lens of context (Olivelle, 2004).

This dynamic vision of *dharma* questions the hierarchical assumptions of classical Vedic models, such as the *varṇāśrama-dharma* framework that assigns duties based on caste and stage of life. Although Bhyrappa acknowledges the earlier doctrines of the *Dharma*, he also makes it clear that alternative traditions can challenge them. Conversations continue in every encounter, suggesting that *Dharma* is polyphonic and more like a caravan than a temple: moving and negotiating constantly.

Bhyrappa's understanding of *Dharma* has important implications for the upcoming field that is Dharma Studies, which seeks to move beyond narrow understandings of the concept of *Dharma* towards a more holistic grasp of how *Dharma* works in lived contexts. The study of *Dharma* up until now has always focused on classical texts like the *Manusmṛiti*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, or Mīmāṃsā treatises that present *Dharma* as a set of strict rules for behaviour. While these texts can be studied philosophically, it is easy to overlook the narrative and lived experiences of *Dharma*.

By putting storytelling first, Bhyrappa invites scholars to expand their approaches. *Sartha* shows how fiction can be just as philosophically rich as scripture because fiction captures dilemmas, ambiguities, and points of conflict that theory might gloss over. As Wilhem Halbfass says, cross-cultural philosophy must engage in not only concepts but also concrete forms of those cultural concepts, including myths, rituals, and narratives (Halbfass, 1988).

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, it becomes clear that *Sartha* is more than just historical fiction. It is an experiment that uses creativity to grapple with philosophical questions around ethics, pluralism, and cultural identity in fiction. Through conversations between various Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions on ethics, Bhyrappa not only recreates the philosophical milieu of the eighth century but also models a method of ethical engagement for a contemporary audience.

From the perspective of literary theory, *Sartha* illustrates the various possibilities of the novel as a form of polyphonic dialogue, with reference to Bakhtin's notion of the novel as a space where voices and opinions coexist without resolution. The narrative structure positions readers within different contexts to create the sort of empathy and engagement required to enter into a critical conversation. Rather than comparing Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain ethics, Bhyrappa illustrates how these systems were challenging each other's understanding through lived experience.

Sartha, within Dharma Studies, offers a path toward a more interdisciplinary, dialogical approach. By incorporating textual analysis and historical context with the narrative form, scholars may build more comprehensive knowledge of how Dharma is a living tradition. Future research might involve mapping digitally the caravan's path as it intersects with historical trade networks and sacred geographies, revealing how material and spiritual economies interact. Comparative studies may also extend *Sartha*'s representation into ongoing comparisons with other philosophical novels, such as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, providing awareness of how other cultural contexts grapple with the challenge of representation of ethical pluralism.

In its final movement, *Sartha* leaves the reader with an image of the caravan moving through time in a way that is left unaccomplished. This image captures Bhyrappa's view of *Dharma*, which he defines as not a destination, but a journey, or path, marked by dialogue, conflict, and renewal. Bhyrappa has created a text that entwines historical detail, philosophical debate, and narrative artistry, speaking to both past and present. For the contemporary reader, *Sartha* gives us a way to engage, if even to a small degree, with India's pluralistic heritage rather than indulging in nostalgia or dogmatism. It presents a challenge to see *Dharma* no longer as a thing of the past but as a living practice, in flux, like the caravan.

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