

EMBODIED DHARMA: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HINDU RITUAL AND EVERYDAY LIFE

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Abstract :

This article explores how dharma becomes embodied through the ritual practices and everyday life of Hindu communities. Using a sociological lens, the study examines how rituals, gestures, spatial arrangements, and habitual actions function as embodied expressions of moral order, cultural identity, and social cohesion. Drawing on theories of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty), symbolic interactionism (Goffman), and interpretive anthropology (Geertz), the analysis reveals that dharma is not merely a philosophical doctrine but a lived social reality enacted through mindful practices, communal participation, and embodied discipline. Through ethnographic insights from Hindu ritual spaces in Bali and India, this study demonstrates how daily offerings, temple routines, bodily movement, and ritual choreography reinforce collective memory, negotiate cultural meaning, and maintain social harmony. The article contributes to sociological discussions on religion by showing how sacred values become material, sensory, and performative in contemporary Hindu life.

Key Words : Embodied Dharma, Hindu Ritual Practices, Cultural Sociology, Embodiment Theory, Balinese Hinduism, Symbolic Interaction, Ritual Performance

1. Introduction

Dharma, as the foundational moral principle that governs Hindu ethical, social, and cosmological life, is frequently articulated through philosophical treatises, sacred texts, and theological discourse. However, within the lived realities of Hindu communities, dharma extends far beyond doctrinal formulations. It becomes embodied—materialized through bodily actions, ritual gestures, spatial orientations, sensory experiences, and the repetition of everyday practices. This embodiment transforms dharma from an abstract metaphysical ideal into a tangible, performative, and socially embedded reality that shapes the rhythms of communal life.

In many Hindu societies—particularly in Bali—ritual activity is not confined to grand temple ceremonies or calendrical festivals. Instead, ritual permeates daily existence: the preparation of offerings (sega, canang sari, daksina), the recitation of morning prayers, ritual ablutions (melukat), the use of sacred water, the observance of auspicious directions, and the organization of space according to cosmic principles such as tri mandala and tri loka. Such practices illustrate that the sacred is not isolated from the mundane; rather, the mundane becomes sacred through patterned actions that express, internalize, and reproduce dharma. Through these rituals, individuals and communities cultivate a moral sensibility that is simultaneously spiritual, cultural, and social.

As Clifford Geertz (1973) emphasizes, rituals function both as models of reality—reflecting cultural meaning—and models for reality—guiding social behavior. In this sense, Hindu ritual does more than symbolize dharma; it teaches participants how to inhabit dharma through the disciplined use of the body, the senses, and communal interaction. Ritual thus becomes an interpretive system through which individuals perceive order, negotiate identity, and situate themselves within the broader moral universe.

Scholars of embodiment such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty argue that the body is not merely an instrument or vessel but the primary site through which meaning is generated. The body perceives, remembers, and performs cultural knowledge long before such knowledge becomes consciously articulated. Within Hindu practice, the body kneels, bows, sprinkles holy water, arranges offerings, walks through temple courtyards, and participates in collective movement—thereby becoming the medium through which dharma is enacted. These embodied actions form a repertoire of ritual behaviors that are learned, repeated, and passed down intergenerationally, allowing dharma to become a lived tradition rather than a purely intellectual concept.

This article therefore examines how dharma becomes embodied in Hindu ritual and everyday life, focusing on the sensory, performative, and social dimensions of religious practice. By observing not only what Hindu communities believe but what they do—how they move, sense, orient, and participate with one another—we can better understand how moral order is sustained, how collective identity is formed, and how cultural resilience is maintained despite social transformation. Through a sociological and phenomenological lens, this study highlights that dharma is not simply a principle to be understood but a reality to be enacted, felt, and lived through the body.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Dharma as Lived Practice

In classical Hindu texts, dharma is often conceptualized as a metaphysical principle governing moral order, cosmic stability, and righteous conduct. However, scholars of lived religion argue that dharma must be understood not only as a textual prescription but as an embodied, everyday practice. As Orsi (2005) and Hall (1997) suggest, religious meaning is generated through actions, emotions, and lived experiences rather than solely through doctrine. In Hindu contexts, the daily preparation of offerings, the lighting of incense, the sprinkling of tirtha, and the performance of morning and evening prayers function as micro-practices through which dharma becomes visible and tangible. These small acts constitute what Morgan (2010) calls “materialized piety,” where objects, gestures, and sensory engagements express and sustain religious life.

In Balinese Hinduism specifically, the repetitive offerings (canang sari, segehan, daksina) embody a continuous enactment of gratitude, cosmic balance, and environmental partnership—illustrating that dharma is not simply known but repeatedly performed.

2.2 Ritual, Symbol, and the Social Body

Émile Durkheim (1995) emphasizes that ritual is central to the formation of collective consciousness. Through shared symbolic actions, individuals experience a sense of unity and moral belonging that transcends individual identity. Victor Turner (1969) furthers this view by highlighting ritual's liminal and performative qualities, which generate *communitas*—a state of social equality and emotional solidarity.

Within Hindu ritual life, the social body manifests through choreographed movement: walking in temple processions, aligning bodies according to cardinal directions, kneeling during offerings, or participating in collective chanting. These embodied actions operate as “symbolic languages” that communicate cosmological principles while reinforcing communal identity. Symbols such as flowers, fire, water, and sacred colors become carriers of cultural memory, allowing Hindu communities to maintain continuity in the midst of change. Thus, ritual operates not merely as representation but as a mechanism for producing and regulating the social body.

2.3 Embodiment Theory

Phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (1962) argue that the body is not a passive object but a primary site of perception and meaning-making. Thomas Csordas (1990) expands this into the anthropology of embodiment, proposing that the body is the “existential ground of culture.” In the Hindu context, ritual postures (*mudra*), breath work (*pranayama*), sensory elements (fragrance, sound, touch), and spatial movement become vehicles through which religious knowledge is internalized.

Furthermore, embodied actions such as bowing (*sembah*), circumambulating (*pradaksina*), or sprinkling holy water are not arbitrary gestures; they encode cosmological relationships and moral orientations. Through repeated bodily discipline, practitioners learn to inhabit *dharma* not as abstract knowledge but as lived orientation—an embodied ethical consciousness. This aligns with Asad's (1993) argument that religious tradition is reproduced through bodily training and sensory cultivation.

2.4 Everyday Religion and Cultural Sociology

The field of everyday religion, developed by scholars like Ammerman (2014) and McGuire (2008), emphasizes the ways religious meaning emerges through mundane routines, domestic spaces, and interpersonal relationships. In many Hindu societies, the sacred permeates ordinary life: the home altar becomes a micro-temple; cooking becomes ritualized; spatial layouts of homes reflect cosmological hierarchies; and daily greetings carry spiritual significance (*Om Swastyastu*).

From a cultural sociology perspective, particularly informed by Alexander (2003), these practices function as symbolic systems that shape social identity and moral order. In Hindu communities, the boundary between sacred and secular is porous, and embodiment plays a crucial role in sustaining this permeability. The ordinary becomes sacred through repetitive engagement, illustrating that *dharma* is more accurately understood as a lived *habitus* than a doctrinal category.

2.5 Local Studies in Hindu Cultural Practice

Indonesian scholars have made significant contributions to understanding Hindu ritual and cultural systems, especially in Bali. Titib (2003) examines the theological and symbolic dimensions of Hindu-Balinese rituals, highlighting the integration of cosmology, aesthetics, and communal ethics. Goris (1926) provides foundational studies on ritual manuscripts (lontar), revealing how textual traditions inform ritual choreography and cultural norms. Bandem (1996) explores the performative nature of Balinese ritual arts—dance, movement, and sound—showing how aesthetic embodiment reinforces spiritual and social order. Bagus (1971), meanwhile, studies cultural structures and philosophical principles underlying Balinese Hinduism, emphasizing harmony (rwa bhineda, tri hita karana) as foundational to daily practice.

These local studies demonstrate that Hindu practice in Bali is inherently embodied, aesthetic, and communal. Ritual is not merely an event but a continuous cultural performance through which dharma becomes lived reality. Integrating these local perspectives with global theories enriches the sociological understanding of Hindu embodiment and ritual life.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in cultural sociology and embodiment theory. The qualitative orientation is chosen to capture the depth, texture, and multisensory dimensions of Hindu ritual practices and everyday religious life—elements that cannot be reduced to numerical representation. Cultural sociology provides the analytical framework to interpret ritual as a symbolic system that constructs meaning, identity, and social order. At the same time, embodiment theory offers tools to analyze how sensory engagement, bodily movement, spatial awareness, and performative gestures become vehicles for enacting dharma.

This approach aligns with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which views the body as the primary site of perception, as well as Csordas's conceptualization of the body as the "existential ground of culture." Through these lenses, the study seeks to understand how dharma is not only believed but lived, felt, and performed through bodily and communal practice. A qualitative interpretive paradigm is therefore essential to uncover the nuanced ways in which sacred values are inscribed in everyday ritual action.

3.2 Data Sources

To obtain a robust and holistic understanding of the embodiment of dharma, the study draws on three primary types of data:

3.2.1 Ritual Observations

Participant and non-participant observations were conducted in various ritual settings, including daily household offerings, temple ceremonies, processions, and cleansing rites. Attention was given to:

- bodily movements (kneeling, bowing, offering gestures),
- spatial choreography (temple courtyards, altars, cardinal directions),

- sensory elements (sound of bells, incense fragrance, textures of offerings),
- interactions among participants,
- implicit ritual etiquette and embodied norms.

These observations allow the researcher to document how dharma is enacted through patterned physical behavior and communal practice.

3.2.2 Interviews with Key Informants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- pemangku (temple priests),
- sulinggih (high priests)
- krama adat (customary community members)
- ritual performers, household practitioners, and elders.

The interviews aim to explore:

- meanings attributed to ritual gestures and offerings,
- embodied experiences of participants,
- perceptions of dharma in daily practice,
- intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge,
- transformations and continuity of ritual embodiment in contemporary contexts.

Narratives gathered from these informants provide interpretive depth and cultural insight that complement observational data.

3.2.3 Documentation of Embodied Ritual Elements

Field documentation includes photographs, field notes, video recordings of ritual movement, sketches of spatial layouts, and inventories of offerings and symbolic objects. These materials help in analyzing:

- how the body interacts with objects,
- how space is used to structure sacred action,
- how material culture supports embodied performance of dharma.

This multimodal documentation enhances the accuracy and rigor of interpretive analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through a thematic and interpretive approach, integrating principles from symbolic interactionism and phenomenology of the body.

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology, transcripts, field notes, and visual documentation were coded to identify recurring themes such as:

- bodily discipline,
- sensory ritual elements,
- symbolic movement,
- moral embodiment,
- communal identity formation,
- sacred spatial habitus.

Themes were then refined to reveal patterns of embodied dharma across different ritual and daily contexts.

3.3.2 Interpretive Analysis

Geertz's interpretive anthropology guides the analysis of symbols, meanings, and cultural narratives embedded within ritual acts. Through "thick description," the study interprets how gestures, objects, and spatial arrangements communicate cosmological and moral values.

3.3.3 Embodied Phenomenology

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty and Csordas, the analysis focuses on bodily engagement—how participants perceive, feel, and internalize dharma through movement, posture, touch, and sensory awareness. This allows the study to examine dharma not as abstract principle but as lived reality.

3.3.4 Symbolic Interactionism

Goffman's framework is used to explore how interpersonal interactions, ritual etiquette, and social performances shape the moral and symbolic order of Hindu communities.

By synthesizing these analytic strategies, the study provides a holistic understanding of how dharma is embodied, enacted, and transmitted through ritual and everyday life.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses how dharma becomes embodied through ritual practices and everyday life in Hindu communities. The results demonstrate that dharma is not merely a doctrinal ideal but a lived, sensory, and social reality enacted through bodily movements, spatial orientations, material cultures, and communal interactions. These findings are interpreted through the lenses of cultural sociology, embodiment theory, and interpretive anthropology.

4.1 Embodied Dharma in Everyday Ritual Practice

4.1.1 Everyday Rituals as Moral Habitus

Field observations indicate that daily actions—preparing canang sari, lighting incense, sprinkling tirta, and arranging offerings—constitute a rhythmic moral habitus. These small gestures function as micro-practices that cultivate patience, devotion, focus, and humility through repeated bodily engagement.

Interviews with pemangku (temple priests) reveal that each detail of offering-making carries ethical significance:

- plucking flowers teaches mindfulness and intention,
- arranging directions reinforces cosmological awareness,
- composing colors reflects harmony (rwa bhineda),
- placing offerings embodies surrender and gratitude.

These patterns align with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, where morality is internalized through bodily discipline and everyday practice rather than through abstract doctrine alone.

4.1.2 The Body as the Site of Dharma

Participants frequently described ritual experiences as “felt through the body”—a sense of peace, lightness, or clarity after ritual performance. Such sensory experiences affirm Csordas’s notion of the body as the “locus of religious experience.”

In this sense, dharma is not only understood intellectually but embodied affectively and sensorily.

4.2 Ritual Movement and the Formation of Social Order

4.2.1 Spatial Choreography as Moral Discipline

Ritual space—structured through tri mandala, temple courtyards, and sacred spatial hierarchies—guides bodily movement. When practitioners naturally move toward kaja-kangin (mountain-east) to pray, they enact cosmology through habit.

Ritual choreography, including pradaksina (clockwise circumambulation), melasti processions, and structured entry into temple gates, embeds the body within sacred order.

These findings highlight that sacred space acts as a pedagogy of morality, shaping bodily behavior and reinforcing cosmological principles.

4.2.2 Collective Ritual and Communal Solidarity

Large-scale rituals such as odalan, melasti, and ngaben generate forms of collective effervescence described by Durkheim. Community members often expressed that during rituals they “feel united as one body.”

Ritual thus does more than express dharma—it produces community, binding individuals into moral and emotional solidarity.

4.3 Material, Sensory, and Aesthetic Dimensions of Dharma

4.3.1 Material Culture as Embodied Symbolism

Ritual objects—flowers, incense, fire, tirta, bells, and sacred cloth—function as sensory-symbolic mediators that shape religious perception. These objects act as “material texts” that communicate sacred meaning through touch, smell, color, and sound.

Through repeated ritual use, these materials become part of the practitioner’s corporeal memory, reinforcing dharmic awareness.

4.3.2 Sensory Alignment and Moral Experience

The multisensory environment of ritual—fragrance of incense, tactile coolness of holy water, warmth of flame, rhythmic sounds of bells—creates emotional and mental states aligned with dharma. A sulinggih (high priest) explained that ritual elements “teach the body to return to balance.”

This supports Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that perception is foundational to world-making; in this context, dharma is constructed through sensory alignment.

4.4 Embodied Dharma Beyond Ritual Spaces

4.4.1 Social Etiquette as the Extension of Ritual Discipline

Findings indicate that ritual embodiment extends into social behavior. Greetings such as Om Swastyastu, respectful postures, gentle speaking tones, and deference to elders reflect dharma in interpersonal interactions.

This blurring of ritual and social domains shows that ritual habitus shapes everyday ethics—"the ritualized body becomes the social body."

4.4.2 Embodied Ethics in Conflict Resolution

In community meetings (pesangkepan), bodily comportment—posture, sitting arrangements, tone of voice—plays a key role in maintaining harmony. Ritualized bodily discipline reduces tension and facilitates consensus-building.

This reveals that dharma operates as a social technology of embodied ethics, guiding conflict resolution and social cohesion.

4.5 Negotiating Tradition and Modernity Through Embodiment

4.5.1 Adaptive Ritual Practices in Contemporary Contexts

Modern transformations have not diminished embodied ritual practice; instead, communities adapt ritual expressions to contemporary media:

- electric incense burners,
- digital learning of mudra,
- online streaming of temple ceremonies,
- meditation apps integrating Hindu principles.

Despite technological shifts, the embodied structure—movement, gesture, spatial orientation—remains intact, preserving ritual meaning.

4.5.2 Embodied Dharma as Cultural Resilience

Participants noted that ritual helps them cope with stress, grief, and uncertainty. Practices such as melukat (purification) or offering-making provide emotional grounding and psychological resilience.

Thus, embodied dharma serves as a cultural coping mechanism, functioning therapeutically in times of social or personal disruption.

4.6 Theoretical Integration

4.6.1 Durkheim: Ritual as Moral Community Formation

Findings affirm Durkheim's view that ritual generates collective morality and reinforces social boundaries.

4.6.2 Merleau-Ponty: The Body as the Medium of Perception

Participants experience dharma through bodily sensation and movement, aligning with phenomenological claims that the body creates meaning.

4.6.3 Geertz: Ritual as Cultural Text

Ritual gestures, directions, and materials form symbolic texts that must be interpreted within cultural systems.

4.6.4 Csordas: Embodiment as Religious Practice

Dharma becomes real when enacted through bodily discipline, sensory engagement, and corporeal intentionality.

4.6.5 Bourdieu: Habitus and Embodied Dispositions

Ritual practice produces durable dispositions—posture, gesture, emotional tone—that guide social behavior in dharmic ways.

Summary of Key Findings

Dharma is embodied through:

- repetitive bodily rituals,
- spatial choreography,
- sensory-symbolic experiences,
- communal ritual performance,
- social etiquette shaped by ritual habitus,
- resilience practices that integrate body, emotion, and spirituality.

In essence, Embodied Dharma becomes a lived social reality, transmitted through the body and sustained through community life.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dharma, far from being a purely philosophical or scriptural concept, is a lived and embodied reality within Hindu communities. Through daily rituals, sensory experiences, bodily movements, and communal participation, dharma becomes woven into the rhythms of everyday life. The findings show that ritual embodiment is not merely an expression of belief but a fundamental mechanism through which moral order, cultural identity, and social cohesion are produced and sustained.

The analysis reveals that the body serves as a primary site of religious experience. Through repeated practices—such as offering-making, prayer gestures, spatial orientation, and participation in temple ceremonies—practitioners internalize ethical values and cosmological principles. These embodied actions form a moral habitus that guides behavior both inside and outside ritual spaces. Thus, ritual and social life are deeply interconnected: the discipline of the ritual body becomes the discipline of the social body.

Moreover, the study highlights that material and sensory environments play a crucial role in shaping religious understanding. The fragrance of incense, the coolness of holy water, the warmth of fire, and the rhythm of bells collectively construct an affective landscape through which dharma is felt and enacted. These sensory-symbolic elements reinforce the cultural continuity of Hindu practice and anchor moral values in embodied experience.

Ritual participation also generates communal solidarity, affirming Durkheim's argument that collective ritual produces social cohesion. In Hindu communities, ritual events create

moments of shared emotion and unity that reaffirm collective identity. At the same time, the adaptive capacity of embodied dharma—visible in modern ritual innovations and digital engagements—demonstrates cultural resilience in the face of social change.

By integrating insights from embodiment theory, cultural sociology, and interpretive anthropology, this study affirms that dharma is not only believed but performed, enacted, and felt through the body. Understanding dharma as embodied offers a nuanced perspective on Hindu religiosity—one that foregrounds the interplay between physical practice, symbolic meaning, and social structure.

Ultimately, this research underscores that the vitality of Hindu tradition lies in its ability to transform abstract moral principles into lived, embodied practices. Through this embodiment, dharma becomes a powerful force for sustaining cultural identity, guiding ethical behavior, and nurturing social harmony within Hindu communities.

5.1 Author Contributions

The author conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted field observations and interviews, performed data analysis, and prepared the manuscript. All sections—from literature review to conclusion—were written and revised solely by the author. The author approved the final version of the article and is accountable for its academic integrity.

5.2 Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, without financial or institutional pressures that could influence the findings or interpretations presented in this article.

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