

Editorial

THE PULSE OF POWER IN SPIRITUAL DIPLOMACY

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To every mind, power is both the silent architect and the visible force of human existence, influencing actions and destinies alike. Of all concepts and their various connotations, I have been particularly fascinated by the notion of power, given its profound religious, social and philosophical significance and its pervasive influence across every facet of human existence. Democracy unfolds political power; health embodies bodily power and money signifies economic power. Physical, nuclear, electrical and thermal forces illustrate diverse manifestations of power. Words, thoughts, actions, speech and literature wield immense power, demonstrated repeatedly throughout history. Some relinquish all worldly possessions in pursuit of spiritual and divine power, while psychologists emphasize the importance of mental prowess. Nature exhibits its own manifestations of power, echoing through the forces of the cosmic world, while legal power asserts its authority in the realm of judicial systems, establishing social order and justice. In the virtual realm, soft power emerges as a subtle yet decisive factor in global interactions. It is against this backdrop that the current issue of the *Journal of Dharma* reflects upon the intricate nuances of political, ethical, social and religious power, unpacking the dynamics of corridors of power and examining how they empower and depower individuals, communities, and nations alike.

Power extends far beyond politics and economics; it penetrates faith, ethics, culture and the imagination of humanity itself. It is expressed in the votes of citizens and the decrees of rulers, in the strength of armies and the fragility of bodies, in the hidden depths of the psyche and the expansive sweep of spiritual

quests. To focus on power, therefore, is to trace the multiple forces that define human existence and its possibilities. The language of power is never monolithic but polyphonic, resounding in multiple registers at once. Political power manifests in parliaments and on the streets, shaping constitutions and mobilizing protests alike. Economic power dictates inclusion and exclusion through capital, deciding who belongs within the circuits of privilege and who remains at the margins of deprivation. Scientific and technological power, in turn, redefines the very boundaries of knowledge and survival, determining not only how societies live but also how they imagine their futures. Yet, history teaches us that power also rests in silence—in the words withheld, the narratives suppressed, and the identities erased. As Michel Foucault argues in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), silence is not merely absence but a strategic form of discourse; what remains unsaid often bears as much weight as what is proclaimed.

Across centuries, literature, speech and symbols have toppled empires and inspired revolutions. From pamphlets igniting the French Revolution to songs fuelling anti-colonial struggles, they remind us that even the smallest voice, if persistent, can unsettle the strongest regime. Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities* (1983), explains how print culture and shared symbols mobilize revolutionary consciousness by binding disparate individuals into a common cause. Likewise, James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) illuminates the power of “hidden transcripts”—the whispered dissent, clandestine texts, and images passed hand to hand—that fracture the seeming stability of hegemonic authority without overt confrontation. Power, therefore, is not a monologue but a contested dialogue, ceaselessly rewritten in visible and invisible scripts.

Religious traditions, too, have always grappled with power’s dual face. Some relinquish possessions and ego in pursuit of divine strength; others institutionalize authority, codifying it into rituals and hierarchies. For philosophers, power is both problem and possibility: a means to justice, a temptation to

tyranny, a concept that demands ongoing interrogation. The corridors of power are thus not only the halls of kings or parliaments—they are also the everyday spaces where ordinary people negotiate, reinterpret and sometimes subvert authority.

In our present age, power takes on newer and subtler guises. Virtual platforms amplify voices and silence others at the same time, making “soft power” a crucial currency in international and cultural relations. Nature itself reminds us of its sovereignty through floods, earthquakes, and changing climates, unsettling human hubris and exposing our fragility. Meanwhile, legal systems claim to arbitrate justice, though often reflecting the asymmetries of the societies they serve. As the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres reminded the world in 2023, democracy and human rights remain “hallmarks of resilient, inclusive and peaceful societies.” He stressed that to harness the power of democracy, nations must invest in social contracts, strengthen checks and balances, combat inequality and corruption, and set up digital guardrails to protect against perils while realizing promise. These words echo the responsibility to ensure that the corridors of power remain open to all voices — not only to the dominant few.

As power is often understood in hard terms—military might, economic leverage, political negotiation, we need to realize that beneath these visible structures, there beats another current: *the pulse of power in spiritual diplomacy*. It is less noisy than summits and less dramatic than sanctions, but it carries a subtle force that can reshape relationships and heal wounds where conventional diplomacy fails. Spiritual diplomacy does not deny the reality of politics; rather, it seeks to transform it. Its language is not one of coercion but of conscience, not of domination but of dialogue. When the prophet Isaiah envisions nations beating their swords into ploughshares, he is describing nothing less than diplomacy animated by spirit—a covenantal politics where humanity’s deepest yearnings for peace take precedence over its shallowest instincts for conquest. The pulse of power in spiritual diplomacy does not throb in clenched fists but in open hands. Think of the gentle authority of Mahatma Gandhi, who negotiated with

empires through fasting rather than force, or the moral courage of Martin Luther King Jr., who shifted the American conscience through the cadence of a sermon rather than the command of a state. Their power lay not in weapons but in witness, not in threats but in truth.

The current issue of *Journal of Dharma*, while celebrating its 50th year of contributions to the world of faith and knowledge society, seeks to illuminate these corridors of power from subaltern, socio-religious and philosophical perspectives. By examining how power empowers and disempowers, liberates and enslaves, nurtures and destroys, our contributors map its trajectories while keeping in mind the Heraclitean flux of existence. I invite all our readers to journey through these pages as fellow voyagers, attentive not only to the grandeur of power but also to its shadows. For in the end, the question is not only who holds power, but how power holds us.

The first article "*Watching and Being Watched: Power, Surveillance and Agency Within the Devadasi System*" by Jisa A Thomas, Anna V, and Vagishwari SP employs Foucault's Panopticism and Agency Theory to examine how the Indian *devadasi* system evolved into one of surveillance and exploitation, while also revealing the subtle acts of resistance and autonomy exercised by *devadasis* within oppressive power structures. The second article "*The Therapeutic Power of Music in Contemporary Chinese Society*" by Ping Su highlights music's role as a healing power that restores harmony in marginalized communities. Rooted in Confucian ideals, Chinese musical traditions emphasize moral and cultural excellence through practice. The study explores musicology as a path to hope, healing and peace, especially amidst technological and cultural fragmentation.

In "*Theorizing the Ghibli Effect: A Critique of AI, Aesthetic Theft and the Crisis of Authorship in the Corridors of Power*," Ankita Das and Sanjana Santra critique the hidden power of generative AI's replication of Studio Ghibli's style. They frame it as an act of aesthetic theft that strips art of emotional depth, cultural memory and authorship. Drawing on critical theorists, the article argues that this phenomenon constitutes an ethical rupture in creative

labour, threatening cultural heritage, spiritual imagination and artistic equity. Zheng Gong, Mingli Wang, Liuji Gong and Guorui Zhou in their article *“Contemporary Reconstruction of the Yellow River Myth: The Power of Religious Narrative in Shaping Cultural Identity”* examine how the Yellow River transformed from a sacred religious symbol into a modern emblem of Chinese nationalism and identity. Using interdisciplinary perspectives, it shows the power of literature, media and state narratives to continually reshape and connect the mythical tradition with contemporary cultural imagination.

The article *“The Supervenience of Powers: A Paradigmatic Intervention of Ofo in the Exercise of Democratic Power in Nigeria”* by Nicholas Onyemechi Alumona and Leonard Chidubem Nwadiolu argues that Nigeria’s democracy suffers from corruption and legitimacy crises due to its disconnection from indigenous spiritual foundations. Through philosophical analysis, it proposes integrating the *ofo* symbol—embodying truth, justice and ancestral accountability—into democratic practice to restore moral legitimacy, spiritual accountability and effective governance. In *“Marxist View on Religion: An Auxiliary Approach to Power and Just Society,”* Youliang Chen reinterprets Marx’s critique of religion as targeting distorted forms that upheld unjust power. Using an auxiliary approach, the article explores religion’s potential for social transformation, linking Marx’s materialist praxis with Chinese ethical traditions to highlight pathways toward justice and an equitable society. The final article, *“Echoes of Power: Bias, Objectivity and Culpability in Algorithmic and Statistical Worlds”* by Shengying Li, critiques the myth of algorithmic neutrality. Drawing on Nietzsche, Foucault and Kierkegaard, it argues that algorithms embed the values of their designers, amplifying inequities while reshaping ethics into efficiency and justice into probability. It redefines objectivity as reflexive responsibility and views algorithms as narrative actors that echo and amplify power structures.

As we confront climate change, migration crises and geopolitical tensions that test the limits of traditional diplomacy, spiritual diplomacy offers a distinctive and hopeful outlet. It

begins by listening – not merely to governments or corporates but also to the groaning of creation, the cries of the marginalized, and the wisdom of traditions often dismissed as ‘soft.’ Listening itself is an act of power, for it redefines who belongs at the table and who shapes the agenda. Yet spiritual diplomacy is not without humour, for even power can laugh at itself. Perhaps Noah acted as a ‘spiritual diplomat,’ convincing lions and lambs to share a boat for forty days! If such unlikely alliances were possible then, can we not believe that even today adversaries may discover common ground under a higher calling? The task before us is to keep our fingers on this pulse – not letting it fade into cynicism or get drowned by the noise of hard power. For without it, politics risks becoming soulless, and diplomacy a mere exchange of interests. With it, however, power becomes relational, creative and redemptive. The pulse of power in spiritual diplomacy beats quietly, but it beats faithfully – and it may yet be the rhythm that saves us.

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