

Time For NLSIU to Change Its 'Dharma Rakshati Rakshataha' Motto



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The Twisha Sharma case has made a long-deferred jurisprudential reckoning impossible to ignore: what does it mean for a leading law school to carry a motto drawn from Brahminical patriarchy and who does dharma protect?



A picture of NLSIU Campus. Photo: NLSIU website.

On the day a special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court extended his custody in connection with the death of his wife Twisha Sharma, Samarth Singh walked in front of TV cameras, wearing a black [t-shirt bearing the name and logo of the National Law School of India University](#), Bengaluru. Whether this was deliberate, habitual or simply unreflective of anything is not for this piece to determine. What it did, regardless of intent, was place one of India's most prestigious legal institutions visibly into a case that has drawn the Supreme Court's attention, a CBI investigation and prime-time scrutiny.



NLSIU logo and motto, Photo: NLSIU website. The logo and the motto are not the same thing and in the photographs that circulated they are not equally visible. The logo is clear. The motto, *dharma rakshati rakshataha*, printed beneath the logo in fine type, is not easily legible. But this is a distinction without a consequence. NLSIU's institutional merchandise carries the logo, the name and the motto as a single, indivisible statement. What Samarth Singh wore in that moment of intense public visibility was not a partial invocation of the institution. It was the whole of it, visible or not, legible or not, intended or not.

NLSIU did not choose this moment, yet it has arrived. And it brings with it a question the institution has previously engaged with only internally: what does its motto actually say and does it connote a message a law school committed to critical thinking should be willing to stand behind?

What dharma carries

The motto is commonly translated as "the law protects those who protect the law". It is drawn directly from the fifteenth verse of the eighth chapter of the *Manusmriti*, a provenance NLSIU's own Law and Society Committee acknowledged when it convened [a talk asking whether the institution should reconsider the motto](#) entirely. As the event note observed, dharma in this tradition, as accepted even in B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, alludes to injunctive Vedic passages: religious ordinance, ritual obligation, cosmological order. Not neutral law.

The *Manusmriti's* hierarchies of caste and gender are not incidental to its structure. They are its substance. To strip dharma of this content, to say that NLSIU means only "righteous conduct" or "ethical obligation", is to ignore that words carry their genealogies with them. Intention does not cleanse etymology.

Dharma encodes ritual obligation, caste hierarchy, matrimonial duty and gender role. The duties of a wife are part of it. The customs organising matrimonial alliances, the expectations of families at the time of marriage, all these are part of dharma too. Dowry, as a practice embedded in the logic of matrimonial tradition, is not external to this framework.

Brahmanical patriarchy and the standard of protection

Scholars have long identified the structure that this case has made clearly visible. Uma Chakravarti's foundational work on Brahmanical patriarchy established that caste and gender are not parallel systems of hierarchy, they are mutually constitutive. The subordination of women is not incidental to the Brahmanical order; it is one of its primary mechanisms of reproduction. More recently, [Ujjithra Ponniah, writing in *The Quint*](#), has applied this framework directly to the Twisha

Sharma case, drawing a line between the death of a Brahmin woman in her matrimonial home and the systemic sexual violence visited upon Dalit women, two expressions, she argues, of the same Brahmanical patriarchal structure.

This piece takes that argument into the jurisprudential register. What the Twisha Sharma case has produced, in its public dimension, is not merely an illustration of Brahmanical patriarchy as a social fact, but also an illustration of *dharma rakshati rakshataha* as an operative legal logic – one that determines who receives the protection of law and on what terms.

Consider Giribala Singh's media appearances. A retired district judge, she made herself available to journalists with notable frequency and spoke at considerable length. She told interviewers that Twisha had struggled with mental health issues, framing her daughter-in-law's communications as the unreliable outputs of a person "under treatment". She said that Twisha claimed to like plants but would not tend to the ones at home. She noted, and then retracted when pressed, that Twisha held "liberal views". She spoke of her absence from prayer.

These statements have been widely received as callous, bizarre or self-defeating. These readings miss what the statements are doing. Each statement is a precise invocation of the standards of dharmic femininity: submissiveness, domesticity, piety, the performance of the good wife and daughter-in-law. Each is a retroactive disqualification. A retired district judge was constructing, interview by interview, the jurisprudential case that Twisha Sharma had forfeited the protection of dharma by failing to perform it. She did not tend the plants. She did not pray. She held liberal views. She was, in this telling, not a woman who protected dharma. And therefore, as the implicit logic runs, dharma was not obliged to protect her.

This is not incoherent rambling. It is Brahmanical patriarchy naming itself as a standard of legal protection, spoken by a woman who spent her career on the bench.

When the institution protects itself

The Bar Council of India's suspension of Samarth Singh's licence to practise law extends the same logic to the institutional register, though here it operates in reverse. Where Giribala Singh's statements withdrew protection from the victim, the Bar Council's order withdrew it from the accused with conspicuous speed.

The suspension order, [issued on May 23](#), cited three grounds: the seriousness of the charges, the need to protect the image and integrity of the legal profession and the allegation that Singh had been absconding. The third ground has procedural coherence as conduct obstructing investigation is a legitimate concern independent of conviction. However, the first two are different in kind. They are reputation-protective. The Bar Council moved swiftly to insulate the profession from association with an accused person before any finding of guilt.

The presumption of innocence, one of the foundational protections that law extends to every person, is nowhere engaged in the order. The institution protected itself. Whether it protected the individual is a question the order does not ask.

This is *dharma rakshati rakshataha* in its institutional form. The law moved quickly to protect those who protect it, meaning the profession's image and integrity. The accused, who is also a member of that profession and entitled to the presumption of innocence, received something rather different.

A reckoning that is overdue

The motto is now operating at three sites simultaneously: in the household where Twisha Sharma died, in the media appearances of the retired judge who was her mother-in-law and in the Bar Council order that prioritised professional reputation over due process. At each site, the logic is the same. Protection is conditional. It flows to those who perform and uphold the order: dharmic, professional and institutional. It is withdrawn from, or never extended to, those who fail to perform it or who embarrass it.

This is not an aspiration but a description of how structures of power reproduce themselves. Critical legal studies has established, with considerable force, that law is not a dispassionate neutral arbiter. It reflects and reinforces existing distributions of power. To say that "the law protects those who protect it" is, on that analysis, to say: those who are complicit in the existing order will be covered by it. The logic is not jurisprudential. It is the logic of patronage, align yourself with power and power will protect you.

Protection in law, at its normative best, must be unconditional. It must be extended especially to the vulnerable, to those who cannot protect the law and to those the law has historically failed.

NLSIU has built its reputation, at least in part, on a commitment to critical legal thinking, on training lawyers and scholars who do not accept law's claims about itself at face value. The motto asks something different. It demands that law be protected in order to receive protection. This is compliance rather than critical thinking.

The Twisha Sharma case did not create the question of whether this motto is consistent with that intellectual commitment. Instead, it made the question impossible to defer.

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