

# Dharma As Moral Conduct In Smritis

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Dharma is said to be the pathless path of all human beings. It embraces the whole life man. Every person swears by dharma, but no two people have common dharma to abide by. And it is very difficult to get an exact translation of this word in any language in the world. Like its concept, the word also is very difficult to be understood in its totality. Any definition of it falls short of its whole working. Many attempts have been made by authors of Dharmasastra to define and explain the word dharma. From the literal meaning of the verb dhrin of the word dharma, dh'in dharayate, it is understood that dharma is the sustaining power of the individual and the society where one lives in "dharanat dharma ityahuh, dharmo dharayate prajah, Yo vai dharanasamyuktah sa dharma iti nischayah(1) ;

The word dharma is sometimes used to denote religion. If we look at the derivation of the word religion from the Latin 'religio' which means 'to bind', it is not objectionable to accept the whole of Hindu religion to mean dharma because it is such a discipline that binds us all together in wholesome way, the eternal religion as it is present in Veda and its accessory compositions. That is why Manu says "vedokhilo dharmamulam smritisile cha tadvidam (2); and it has been this dharma, which binds or holds, generates and sustains the individual and the society in peace.

A passage in sri mahaanarayaopanisat tells the important feature of dharma as "dharmo visvasya jagatah pratistha, loke dharmistham praja upasarpanti; dharmena papamapanudanti; dharme sarvam pratisthitam; tasmad dharmam paramam vadanti(3). It can be said that dharma is a well-supporting principle leading to integrity and harmony of the individual, harmonious with oneself and with the society he lives in. Thus dharma is the factor and force that sustains an individual, society, or nation during the periods of stress and strain, thus protecting against disintegration and death.

Division of dharma: Dharma is divided mainly in to two sruta and smarta. Sruta includes rites and rituals, ceremonies of Vedic samhitas and brahmanas and Smarta deals with the smritis concerning the various classes and stages of life. Baudhayana and Mahabharata divide dharma into three sruta, smarta and sishstachara i.e.the actions of the models of moral conduct in the society (4). Mitakshara the commentary on Yajnavalkya smriti makes a six fold classification of dharma. 1. Varna dharma, 2. Asrama dharma, 3. Varnasrama dharma, 4. Guna dharma, 5. Nimitta dharma, 6. Sadharana dharma. (5). But Medatithi the commentator on Manu speaks of five fold dharma, deleting the Sadharana dharma from the six of Yajnavalkya.

Although dharma has been divided technically by different dharmashastras including Mahabharata, they did not take it away from its eternal basis and nature. The only difference is its being perceived. It has been identified with many concepts that design the structure and order on the spiritual and secular planes. On the spiritual plane, it has been identified with "sat" i.e. rita and on the secular plane it has been perceived as the mode of life, code of conduct, which regulates man's work and activities as a member of society and as an individual. It also intends to bring about the gradual development of man and enable him to reach what is aimed to be the goal of human life.

First, let us look at the development of the doctrine of dharma. Conception of rita is said to be seed. The sublime and exalted truth is the basis of dharma, it is said. The Brihadaranyakopanisat says that truth and dharma are in practical life identical terms. And the all approved reality "Sarvam khalvidam Brahma" is the all pervading one. From the subtlest to the grossest and from the largest to the minutest - whether living or

non-living- all entities are supported by and permeated with that 'Reality' as the very essence of their being, as their self. And this reality i.e. Brahman, is present in all entities and beings as the Atman and is spiritual and is absolute, infinite existence, consciousness and bliss-param, anantam, sachidanandasvarupam. The whole universe, emerges from it, works in it, and merges back into it. It is because of this law of Brahman which regulates the outward inward workings of the whole universe it is also called cosmic law. And dharma is identified with this cosmic law which regulates the functioning of individuals and the society and supports the entire universe. And this dharma is called rita on the plane of cosmic order, and as dharma on the plane of social and individual order, karma on the plane of action and moral order. These are three aspects of one comprehensive and pervasive great law and each one of them is often used to represent the whole concept and sometimes used interchangeably. Rita is used as the equivalent of satya- truth, a moral virtue and anrita is its opposite, like asatya. And satya derived from sat- existence or reality is often said to uphold the whole universe and its beings, and is equated with rita and dharma. Satya is considered to be the principle aspect of universal truth and dharma its practical aspect. Chandogyopanishat states that "he really speaks surpassingly who speaks surpassingly with satya. The Brihadaranyakopanishat refers to Brahman as truth of truth (6). Ramayana also glorifies satya as Brahman -:

Satyamekapadam brahma satye dharmah pratisthitah!

Satyamevaksaya vedah satyenavapyate param!!(7). And Mahabharata sings of the glory of satya thus:-  
Satyam satsu sada dharmah satyam dharmah sanatanah!

Satyameva namasyeta satyam hi parama gatih!!

Satyam dharmasvapo yogah satyam brahma sanatanam!

Satyam yajnah parah prokta sarvam satye pratisthitam!! (8).

Brihadaranyakopanishat remarks that truth and dharma are in practical life, identical terms. One of the noblest prayers in all literature is said to be from Brihadaranyakopanishat. It says that one should pray for being led from unreal to real, from darkness to light, from morality to immorality.(9) The Mundakopanishat says "only truth is victorious and not falsehood; the path of gods is spread out by truth".

While giving a convocational address to a student who has just finished his studies and is about to enter grihasthasrama, in a passage of Taittiriyanopanishat it is said that one should speak truth, observe dharma, should not swerve from his own studies, from truth and from dharma. So, it is to be understood here importantly is that satya is not different from dharma and more over it is the aspect of dharma. It is very definition of concept of dharma. When it is said they are not different, to speak truth is to observe dharma, to observe dharma is to be truthful i.e. to be truthful in conduct.

Brihadaranyakopanishat says that truth is the power and strength. It declares that 'there is nothing greater than dharma, even a weak person wishes to control the stronger' (10).

What constitutes dharma; Let us now look at what actually constitutes dharma. Manu enumerates the chief characteristics of dharma thus; vedah smritih sadacharah svasya cha priyamatmanah etc. and Yajnavalkya while defining the concept of dharma, retains the definition of Manu but adds ne more feature to He says that a desire with a good intention is also a feature of dharma (11). Manu, on another occasion, while defining dharma accepts Atmanah tusti self satisfaction as one the feature of dharma. (12) Mahabharata also gives an elaborate definition of it (13).

Dharma & moral conduct: When carefully observed, all these features of dharma listed out by different authors in different books, it is understood that they are all to shape the moral conduct of human beings. If one cultivates such virtues as an individual he becomes successful in his life and such success begets the same in the society he lives in. The study of these books also makes us aware of the fact that performing sacrifices and other rituals and rites have been given a lesser importance of the moral qualities of the human beings which indirectly lead them to attain moksha. And as our ancient texts have placed much stress on the conduct of people, the people who find it difficult to follow many rules and customs leave it aside and ultimately develop an urge to please the inner man which gives them immediate comfort. Without thinking

about the higher values of life, they indulge in common pleasures which are quite momentary and which are having selfish motives.

Manu, who could guess such a possible danger to the concept of dharma, shows a path to solve it. While telling the people to do diligently what gives satisfaction to the antaratman, as he better knows the weakness of human hearts and imagining the danger due to it, cautions them saying about the bitter reality of life. He asks the people to befriend dharma i.e. righteousness only, because that is what actually follows them in the next world but not either the parents, or wife, or sons. He says that gods and the inner man point out the sinful acts (14). In fact the god is within us. God is not different from antaratman. He is none other than our own atman. "Atmanah tustih" means, satisfying the god only. This knowledge of inner god makes us god-feared and warns us from doing many unwanted unbecoming things. And as it also makes us aware of the presence of the god in all living beings, it helps us develop the feelings like love, friendship and kindness and non-violence. And it is this 'ahimsa' which has been listed by many authors as a virtue, while defining the word dharma, which needs some discussion here. When it is said that 'ahimsa paramo dharmah', Vyasa commenting on Patanjali's Yogasutra, says that it is merely not having enmity against any creature under any circumstance. But what actually it means is wishing for everyone's well being i.e. sarvabhuthita. This is based upon the highest philosophical concept of the existence of one universal soul i.e. advaita. Vyasa in his Santiparva puts the same idea in a better form (15). And basing on the doctrine of 'Tattvamasi' and 'Aham Brahmasmi', the two highest philosophical truths which educate us and make us experience the universal oneness, we are asked to cultivate the feelings like daya and ahimsa.

This is where morality and metaphysics combine with each other. And it is this combination that brings harmony and integrity in the society. What all we have to do is discriminate between good and bad of our actions, not only from our point of view, but from the point of others. Every one is under the wrong impression that only he is 'dharmic' only his 'dharma' is the right one. The 'right' or 'wrong' of any actions is not to be decided from his view but it is to be decided depending upon its effect on others and the society. Dakshasmriti says "one who desires happiness should look upon another just as he looks upon himself. Happiness and misery affect one's self and others in the same way" (16). Devala in Kriyaratnakara supports it by saying "what is unfavorable to oneself shall not be done to others".

Mahatma Gandhi catches the very soul of dharma in his characteristic stunningly stark simplicity; "where there are two choices regarding dharma, prefer that which might harm you and not others." After Gandhiji's clarification, no one can say that it is difficult to grasp the essence of dharma. The difficulty is not one of understanding; it is one of acting, which requires putting others above you. Manu also tries to bring the seemingly difficult and different planes of dharma on to one line. He seems to have made an attempt to show how this moral dharma on the social plane comes close to the moksadharmas on the spiritual plane.

Vaiseshika darsana (1-1-2) and Gita (16-123) define dharma as that from which both prosperity and spirituality are attained. It means dharma has its working on the secular side and spiritual side of human life. Sankaracharya in his commentary on the Gita declares in first paragraph itself about the two sides of dharma pravritti and nivritti. And it is this two fold dharma that maintains stability in the world. It is the direct means of both secular and spiritual welfare of living beings. It is the sat and chit. Swamy Vivekananda echoes this saying: "it is being and becoming, it is realization." (17). Dharma binds the society and liberates the individual. Properly understood this is the same as to say that dharma binds the individual and liberates the society. The Indian concept of dharma focuses more on the freedom of the society than on the freedom of the individual. In fact the expressions 'to bind' and 'to liberate' lose their meaning. To bind is not 'to fetter', it is to hold 'together' to keep from falling apart. And the freedom of individual is to be found in 'freedom for individuality'.

It is observed that dharma does not divorce the sacred from the secular. Dharma is meant to lead not to achievement, but to fulfillment. When Sankara said that dharma is spiritual as well as social, he means that there is no dichotomy between the two; it means they go hand in hand. The former fulfills itself in the latter. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says "liberation is not isolation of the immortal spirit from the mortal life, but it is the transfiguring the whole man. It is attained not by destroying but by transfiguration of the tension of human life..... His body, life and mind are not destroyed, but are rendered pure, and become the means and mould of the divine light and he becomes his own masterpiece. His personality is raised to its fullness, its maximum expression, pure and free, buoyant and unburdened. All his activities are for holding together of the world" (18)

#### References:

1. Mahabharata, Karnaparva. 69-58
2. Manusmriti.
3. Mahanarayanopanisat. 79.
4. Baudhayana.I-I-4 and in Mahabharata, Anusasanikaparva 141-65, Vanaparva- 20783, Santiparva, 354-6.
5. Yajnavalkya smriti I-1
6. Chandogyopanisat VII-16-1.Brihadaranyakopanisad.II-1-20.
7. Ramayana. Ayodhyakanda.IV-7.
8. Mahabharata, Santiparva, 162-4, 5.
9. Brihadaranyakopanisat. 1-1-14, I-III-28.
10. Ibid.I-IV-14.
11. Manusmriti II-6. Yajnavalkya smriti I-17.
12. Manusmriti II-6, VI-92.
13. Mahabharata, Santiparva, 162 -21.
14. Manusmriti IV-161.
15. Mahabharata, Santiparva, 162- 21.
16. Dakshasmriti.III-22.
17. Swami Vivekananda, Thoughts of power. P.19.
18. S.Radhakrishnan. Indian Philosophy, Vol -I.P 191.