

## DHARMA : EVOLUTION OF THE HINDU ETHOS

'Dharma' as it is generally understood, i.e. as it appears to an ordinary person and not to a scholar or a teacher of philosophy is a creed, a religious belief, may be belief in one God or many Gods or observance of certain practices and rituals. For reasons not very certain and clear the meaning of the concept of dharma underwent change through the ages from its original meaning and various other meanings superimposed from time to time.

Etymologically dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dhr̥' to sustain, to support or to preserve. Thinkers, philosophers and even religious leaders in India have mainly used it in the etymological sense. The word dharma occurs as early as in the Ṛgveda. In the Puruṣa-sūkta we find the passage :

*Yajñena yajñamayajanta devās tāni dharmāṇi prathamānyāsan* (Rg. X 90, 16). In the beginning there was dharma. Here it stood for natural or cosmic law.

Another concept found in the Vedas is ṛta, also used in the sense of cosmic order, later expanded to include social and moral order.

Brāhmaṇas the texts of vedic ritualism have used dharma both in the above meaning and as truth and righteousness. *yo vai sa dharmah satyam vaitat tasmāt satyam vadantamāhuḥ dharmam vadatīti dharmam vā vadantam satyam vadatīti. Eṣa hīdam sarvam dhārayati etenedam sarvam dhṛtam* (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 14-4-2-26).

Manu as mentioned in the Ṛgveda formulated certain rules about social structure which were later condensed into mānavadharma sūtra in the Sūtra period. These again were formed into mānavadharma śāstra and manusmṛti which included materials taken from the Mahābhārata.

In Manusmṛti dharma means (i) law, usage or custom; (ii) moral merit or virtue; (iii) duty; (iv) right, justice; (v) piety; (vi) morality; (vii) nature or character; (viii) an essential quality or attribute. Manu defined dharma as ten moral principles : dhṛti (patience or perseverance), kṣamā (forgiveness), dama (control of passions and ideas), asteya (non-stealing), śauca

(cleanliness of body, mind and spirit), indriyanigraha (control of the senses), dhī (cultivation of reasonableness), vidyā (knowledge), satya (truthfulness), akrodha (absence of anger).

Dharma as understood in the Mahābhārata though applied both for duty and virtue perhaps stood more for the former than the latter. Krishna helped the Pandavas to restore and establish social order. Since king Duryodhana was not doing his duty as a king he was to be removed from his throne and if necessary even destroyed.

Kautilya the statesman counsellor of Chandra Gupta Maurya (322-298 B. C.) and the author of the Artha Sastra calls dharma the eternal truth holding its sway over the world. Supremacy of dharma over everything else including the scriptures held as sacred was maintained as would be clear from Vasistha's words neither the Veda, nor sacrifice, nor liberality can save him whose conduct is base, who has departed from the right path (Dharma Sūtra vi, 2 + 6). Āpstamba included in dharma or virtue serenity, gentleness, courage, self-control etc.

Kaṇāda the early Vaiśeṣika thinker defines dharma as that which leads to prosperity and spiritual well being.

For the Mimamsa school of thought dharma is the most important and relevant subject of enquiry. Jaimini the great mimamsa thinker says *codanālakṣaṇortho dharmah* i. e. dharma consists in beneficial directions guiding us in our lives as individuals and also as members of the society.

The Dharmasūtras not only consist of rules and regulations for the duties of castes and the stages of life but also rules and regulations dealing with royal duties *rājadharmā* and secular law (*Vyavahāra Smṛti*) was a generic term applied to orthodox non-vedic works synonymous to dharmasūtras.

During the period that the Upanisadas were being composed there arrived on the scene of Indian thought two great figures Mahavira and Buddha (Mahavira is one of the ten eminent Jaina thinkers). Both Mahavira and Buddha used dharma in the sense of a system of principles for right living and a code of discipline.

Buddha's primary concern was with the path following which man could hope to solve one of the most urgent problems of life i. e. suffering. With this purpose he formulated the principles of right living. This is his dharma. It is proclaimed by him as

the *madhyama mārga majjhimapaṭipadā* (the middle path) avoidance of extremes and adoption of the golden mean.

Dharma had been interpreted by several thinkers as representing the essential nature of things e. g. burning of fire, flowing of river downwards etc.

So far as dharma stood for natural law, moral law, code of discipline or even the essence or nature of a thing there was agreement among the Buddhists and the orthodox thinkers.

Buddha however made a novel use of this concept as doctrine. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the dharma. It means 'this happening, that happens.' It is indeed the realisation of the conditioned nature of all things of this world. Buddha maintained that theories are born out of desire. Dharma is the method by which men could renounce all religious theories or views-*drstikṣaya* and attain *nirvāṇa*. Thus in Buddhism the two principal interpretations of the term dharma are *method and doctrine*. Buddha's first sermon after enlightenment is called *dharmacakkappavattana* (setting in motion the wheel of dharma). Buddha speaks of dharma as *santāna* to signify that it is universally applicable (and not eternal). A verse containing Buddha's teaching found chiselled in rock or inscribed in plates, in various places speaks of dharma as

*Ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgataḥ hyavadat |  
teṣāṃ ca yo nirodhaḥ evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇaḥ ||*

The *Tathāgata* has explained the origin of those things which proceed from a cause; their cessation too he has explained. This is the dharma taught by the great *sramana*.

The connotation of dharma in Buddhism includes at least four meanings :—

(i) *Pariyatti* (doctrine as formulated); (ii) *hetu* (condition or causal antecedent); (iii) *guṇa* (moral quality or action) and (iv) *nisatta, nijivata* (the phenomenal as opposed to the noumenal).

Jainism regards dharma as what raises the soul. It also emphasises the code of conduct aspect of dharma. The three gems (*tri-ratna*) i. e. *samyak jñāna, samyakdarśana* and *samyakcāritra* are the three precious principles of life. A further detail of the discipline is given in the form of the five vows *ahiṃsā, satya, asteya, brahmacharya* and *aparigraha* (for house-holders the last two are to be substituted by *Chastity (śauca)* and contentment (*Santoṣa*)).

A study and analysis of Indian thought would reveal that in a very early stage dharma stood for a belief in some supernatural forces residing in various natural phenomena. Primitive people were equipped with very little means of self-protection and survival, nature around them was full of things and events they could not understand. This gave rise to a sense of insecurity and fear. Birds, animals and even trees and stones could help them or harm them. So dharma was what protected them.

The basic meaning continued but at the same time it underwent evolution. Dharma came to include much more than the spirits behind natural phenomena, belief in them and worship of these spirits with the purpose of placating them. Dharma stood for what preserves or advances the higher and nobler aspect of man, what elevates him, what enables him to live in the right way, the way worthy of man. So dharma in India meant a total integrated view of life and a way of life. It is for this reason that what unites the Hindus is not belief in any particular form of God or even in God as such nor in any specific form of ritual. There are certain fundamental ideas and principles which are accepted in general by the Hindus like Law of Karma, transmigration of soul, reverence to the scriptures. God has a secondary place.

Dharma as that which sustains man, must consist of principles which would supply a guideline to right living. Dharma did not necessarily require a divine sanction. It very often stood for a code of duties formulated by wise men, society and convention. Besides source of dharma was not just scriptures, authority or tradition but it was also reason.

Dharma broadly consisted of two types of duties those obligatory on all like truth speaking, love etc. (called *sādhāraṇa dharma*) and those of *varṇa* and *āśrama*. So distinction was drawn between *sanātana dharma* or absolute moral order which had absolute validity and dharma of caste and stage of life, *varṇāśrama dharma*. The latter is extremely significant to an understanding of the essence of Hinduism. Originally the classification might have been based on a distinction of the pigment of the skin, but soon it represented the system of the division of labour aimed at smooth running of society. Gradually these divisions became hereditary. *Āśramadharma* also indicated that a man could devote himself to the quest for personal salvation, perfec-

tion etc., only after he had fulfilled his duties towards the family and the society.

In fact according to Hindu dharma a man was born with triple debts which he must pay back-pitṛ-ṛṇa, ācārya-ṛṇa and devaṛṇa. The social approach is also evident from the five-fold sacrifices or duties that man was expected to perform-brahmayajña, pitṛ-yajña, atithi-yajña, ṛṇyajña and bhūta-yajña. The Indians formulated duties keeping in mind the natural capacities and inclinations of men as well as their age. They were keenly conscious of the fact that dharma is not to be thought of as a mere theory or just in abstraction, it has to move with time, to adapt itself to different and changing conditions of time and requirements of life, keeping the essence and purpose intact. Dharma was not a fixed creed. This lent a flexibility to dharma. Strī-dharma, yugadharma, apaddharma are illustrations of this. Dharma in fact came to acquire such an all pervading significance that a man followed a discipline whether in doing the day to day ordinary chores or rituals or moral actions. This is as much true of Hinduism as of Buddhism and Jainism each of which preached the importance of dharma in man's life and prescribed code of discipline.

Another sphere in which this concept stands out is the scheme of human values or puruṣārthas. In the Sūtras like Kalpasūtras trivarga is accepted (artha, kāma and dharma). Later mokṣa or liberation from suffering and cycle of birth and rebirth was added and in fact it came to be regarded as the Supreme value and goal.

Indian thinkers studied in detail all the aspects of life and its significance. Whether one is engaged in the good of one's own self or the welfare of the society one must develop a sound personality. A man's personality is very complex consisting of innumerable divergent tendencies, inclinations and interests. A proper development would imply a balance and control of all these.

A consideration of the moral goal included a psychological study of the various natural urges and desires of men. A man normally seeks pleasure-sensual and non-sensual (like aesthetic). Some seek wealth and material prosperity. But others make-righteousness their goal and still others seek spiritual realisation

and perfection. These are the four purusarthas. Majority of the Indian thinkers have accepted dharma as of utmost importance in man's life and moral and spiritual pursuit.

The realistic and practical outlook of the Indian thinkers made them realise that it would be unwise to neglect or suppress the natural propensities and urges of men. Indeed that would result in hypocrisy and abnormality. So they recommended that these desires of men should be restrained and guided by moral principles, these should be disciplined. Unrestrained and indiscriminate pursuit of pleasures and wealth could only lead to ruin, wastage, conflict and social disruption. While a balanced development would make men healthy and good citizens and thus ensure social harmony, peace and progress. Dharma in fact elevates man to divine heights.

An interesting point that arises in this context is worth examining. Did the Indian thinkers consider human values to be of four kinds because they felt that these are what are actually desired by men and so should be recognised. In other words did they make a distinction between those which are desired by men and those which ought to be valued by men? If dharma is regarded as that which regulates and harmonises desires for artha, kama etc., why did they not speak of one purusartha or two? Even sages and spiritual leaders like Yājñavalkya when asked by King Janaka whether he desired wealth and cattle or debate and victory in it replied by saying 'both'. This seems to be a pertinent illustration implying that these ancient people recognised both material and spiritual good as goals.

The concept of dharma originating in the very ancient times underwent an evolution. The term was interpreted in diverse ways and its application was extended to a wide field. What is significant is that dharma not merely stands for rituals or religious belief, but connotes rules of conduct in various spheres of life—professional, economic, social and political. Dharma was conceived as something which was not aimed at turning away one's attention from this world. It was rather what implied intense interest and care in the regulation of life. It covers principles which seek to regulate all human activities—individual and social, mundane and spiritual. The strength of dharma and its continued influence on the Indian mind through the ages lie in its compre-

hensiveness, its diverse significance-religious and secular and its grounding not only in faith but in reason.

One of the many fields in which the concept of dharma has been applied is that of politics. It was in fact considered as the basis of power. The primary duty of a king was maintenance of dharma and social institutions (raja-dharma). The superiority of dharma over danḍa or force or power has been recognised by Manu, Kautilya as well as the author of Mahabharata. The duty of a king was to defend dharma and he was endowed with power for this purpose. So if a king failed in this duty, the subjects had the right to revolt and even depose him (*Sukranītisāra* III 43-6. 48-9) (*Mānavadharmā Śāstra* VII III-112).

King Asoka after Kalinga war (261 B. C.) held up the supremacy of conquest through morality-dharmavijaya-over conquest by force. In fact he appointed a class of officers called dharmamahāmātras for the supervision and maintenance of moral ideals. Vinayasthithāpakas appointed by Chandragupta in the Gupta period also belong to this category. In many Buddhist texts a cultural man is called the dhammattha.

From the 14th century onwards till the time of the impact of Western thought with the arrival of the British in India a movement swept India from Punjab in the West to Bengal in the east and Maharashtra in South West, which is known as the Bhakti movement. The aspects of dharma that were emphasised by the thinkers of this period were belief in God and equality of all men and the path of attaining salvation through devotion or bhakti. Caste system came in for a lot of criticism. Infact a large number of thinkers of this period e. g. Nanak, Kabir, Tukaram and others came from the so called low-caste like weaver, barber, cobbler.

This perhaps paved the way to humanitarianism and humanism which became the keynote of modern concept of dharma. It may not be exactly comparable to the form of scientific humanism that we find in the West where God as a divine supernatural being was negated and man was given the highest place and value. Here in India from Ram Mohan Roy to Aurobindo and Gandhi all have preached the gospel of love and service of man as the essence of dharma. Those who accept God have proclaimed that there is no other way to realise God than through the service of man.



It is true that no new development as such took place in the notion of dharma. These thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries accepted certain fundamental ideas from the ancient scriptures, but gave them a new interpretation in the context of modern scientific thought. The emphasis shifted from speculation and meditation away from the world to activism and participation in the social and natural sphere. Elements from Sufism and Christianity were also absorbed.

Vivekananda preached the ideal of Practical Vedanta. It was the realisation of the essence of Hindu dharma i. e. oneness of all and application of it in the life of man. The Advaita philosophy, he said, will have to be translated into action. The concept of Daridra narayana ( God-the poor, the downtrodden ), emphasis on karmayoga, intense humanitarianism are some of the outstanding features of Vivekananda's thought<sup>4</sup>. He said that true dharma lies not in chanting hymns or studying the Śāstras, but in making one a man.

Similar ideas have been expressed by Gandhi as being the essence of dharma. He assimilated elements from Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity and considered removal of suffering, injustice, inequality of men and service of men as true religion. He also emphasised the need of a disciplined regulated life.

Scientific achievements of the modern age have brought about a change in the Indian outlook. A certain degree of scepticism about old concepts and values and atheism too are evident in certain quarters. Yet on the whole dharma in its diverse aspects has not lost its significance. Comprehensiveness of Hindu dharma is responsible for this. A large section of Indians still accept God one or many. Community worship is not a necessity, one can practise some rituals at home in any way one likes. Other aspects of dharma like acceptance of the law of Karma or principles of right living still regulate to an extent the life of an Indian.

Those who do not entertain any belief in God can also find their moorings in dharma—understood in a secular sense. Here lies the significance of humanism interpreted in the Indian context. A quotation from M. N. Roy the political philosopher of modern India will be pertinent : "Humanism holds man responsible for his actions and consequently offers greater guarantee against



possible deviation from the chosen path of rectitude... It claims freedom and deserves it by assuming responsibility.... Humanism does not recognise any metaphysical power to which man must be subordinated. Its ethics is based upon rationality which is the essence of human nature. It declares that man as a man can be moral, and therefore political practice being a form of human activity, can be guided by moral principles."

The wide connotation and comprehensive application of the concept of dharma resulted in a catholic outlook which is evident in Hindu dharma even in its narrow meaning of a religious creed. It did not regard conversion necessary and absorbed elements from other religions.

Order and integration are essential in the life of man both as an individual and as a member of a community. Bigotry and fanaticism arise from a narrow interpretation. Conquest, empire building, suppression, racial discrimination are being recognised more and more as deviations. People all over the world are emphasising co-existence, peace and an orderly and just world.

It is the harmony and orderliness of society which alone can hold man in position and enable him to progress in the social environment. Dharma is not a doctrine to be followed or an ideal to be attained; though these too have been advocated by some of our thinkers when they have included dharma in the scheme of purusarthas or goals of man. In its wider meaning dharma is man's outlook on life both in its personal and social aspects. Dharma is a view of man's existence itself. In fact it is an understanding of man's delicately poised existence, his relation to his immediate environment, to society and to the universe and his harmonious and integrated growth.

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