

Gita's Concept of Dharma, Varnadharmā and Svadharmā

Purnendu Kumar Paul,
Lecturer, Deptt. of Philosophy,
B.B.College, Baiganabadia,
Mayurbhanj, Odisha
Email:durgamadhab.praharaj@gmail.com

Abstract

The article deals with the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita's* concepts of Dharma, *Varnadharmā* and *Svadharmā*. It is seen that most of the available renderings of these concepts are found to have theological leanings. In this line of thinking these concepts lose philosophical significance. But the concept of dharma in Indian philosophical tradition is found as a very dynamic concept and it occupies a very significant place in religion, ethics and philosophy. It is ethically very significant when it refers to these two important concepts, namely, *varnadharmā* and *svadharmā*. So in this article the attempt has been taken to exposing the existing renderings and re-examine the ethical importance of these concepts.

Keywords: Various understanding of dharma, the trans-social (theological) interpretation of the varnas, link between *Varnadharmā* and *Svadharmā*

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Purnendu Kumar Paul,

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Introduction

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It is well accepted that *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* is a religious scripture or a *dharma grantha*. Obviously the concept of dharma is one of the key concepts of this text. The concept of dharma in Indian philosophical tradition is found as a very dynamic concept and it occupies a very significant place in religion, ethics and in philosophy. It is ethically very significant when it refers to these two important concepts, namely, *varnadharmā* and *svadharmā*. But so far as the various renderings are seen about these two concepts we do not come across a common understanding. Here onwards attempt will be taken to expose the existing renderings on these concepts.

Dharma

It is well known that the place where Srikrishna-Arjuna dialogue is supposed to have been conducted and is treated as the origin of the text, the Gita, is a battle field and the battle is treated as *dharma yuddha*. Further, the Gita which is supposed to be the part of the epic, *Mahabharata*, opens with the saying that Kuruksetra is a dharmaksetra where the battle is to be performed. Moreover, one of the primary messages of the Gita is that whenever there is decadence of dharma Lord comes down to earth to establish dharma.¹ It shows that in the above cases the term dharma has been used to mean righteousness. But it cannot be the only meaning of the term dharma.

Kane has very aptly remarked that “Dharma is one of those Sanskrit words that defy all attempts to an exact rendering in English or any other languages.”² However, the attempt has been taken by Jaimini by saying *Chodanaalaksanathodharmahand* in the *Mohabharata* it is described as: *dhaaranaat dharma ityaahuh*. The former refers to non-violation of vedic principles in thought or action and the later emphasizes on the principle of sustenance. In Dandekar's definition one can find the practical approach to define it through its objectives. He says that “securing the material and the spiritual sustenance and growth of the individual and the society.”³ The following definition given by Sri Aurobindo appears to be more specific and comprehensive, that is “Dharma means literally that which one lays hold of and which holds things together, the law, the norm, the rule of nature, action and life.”⁴

It is seen that in the oldest religio-philosophical literature, the *Rg. Veda*, the term dharma is also found to be used with some other prefixes. For example, the term *vidharmā* seems to have been used for eighteen times referring to such cases of violation of the supremacy of God or the Veda. Similarly, with the prefixes of ‘*sva*’ and ‘*satya*’ one can find the uses about forty six times. In the usual sense *svadharmā* refers to the duty of the individual as per his *varna* and *satya dharma* refers to the

path of ultimate reality. Besides the above uses very often prefixes found with dharma in the *Mahabharata* are *desa, kula, jaati, etc.*. With these prefixes dharma refers to the duty pertaining to nation, race and caste respectively. The uses of the term dharma with many other prefixes are also seen in ancient Indian literature in the following manner. Those are namely, *rajadharma, aaptadharma, yugadharma, jaivadharm, varnadharma, aashrama dharma, guna dharma, saadhaarana dharma, nitya dharma, naimitika dharma, para dharma, svadharm, etc.*. My purpose here is to focus on two concepts, namely, *varnadharma* and *svadharm* referring to the text of the Gita.

Svadharm

It may be pointed out here that the meaning of *svadharm* is clear in the sense it refers to dharma of the self. It indicates the possibility of the dharma of others, that is, *para dharma*. In the third chapter, that is the karma yoga or the yoga of action of the Gita, there has been mentioning of the expression *svadharmenidhanasreya, paradharmebhayaavah.*⁵It means that it is preferable to meet the death while performing the duty (*svadharm*) than to adhere other's dharma which is more disastrous. The context of the deliberation is that Arjuna was unable to decide whether he should continue his fight or not. He was afraid of the serious consequences of the war. And also for the reason that for the sake of kingdom he has to kill his kith and kin, cousins, his teacher, his most loving great grandfather, etc.. For this act in future he will be treated as most selfish individual. But Srikrishna, to whom he was treating as his friend, philosopher and guide, has suggested him to continue his fight because it is his *svdharm* which he has to perform. His *svadharm* has been fixed as per his *varna dharma*, that is ksatriya. In this manner the Gita maintains a specific relationship between the *svadharm* and *varna dharma*.

Here the question arises that whether it is obligatory to adhere to varna dharma on religious consideration or moral consideration. The answer to this question is linked with the issue of the origin of the varnas and the duties linked with them. Let us take into account the two popular theories, namely, (i) the Divine origin theory and (ii) the Natural origin theory. The former one is found as trans-social (theological) whereas the later one is claimed to be either need- based or physiological- structure based or efficiency based sociological stand regarding the origin of the varnas.

(i) The Divine origin theory or the Trans-social (theological) theory

This view is in support of the divine source to be the origin of the varnas. A large section of the people believes that the Divine Himself happens to be the source of the origin of the varnas. It is because for them the *prasthanatrayi* to be the authentic source of knowledge. The *prasthanatrayi* constitutes the Vedas, the *Brahmasutra* and

the *Bhagavad Gita*. Out these two most dependable texts the two (first and third) directly support the divine-origin stand. In this framework it is accepted that whatever is there in these texts are direct utterances of the Divine, so those are infallible.

In the fourth chapter ⁶ Krishna narrates before Arjuna that the four varnas are created by me on the basis of *guna*(quality) and *karma* (action). *chaaturv arny ammayasrishtamgunakarmavibhaagashah* .

This view of the Gita is found to be very much in tune with the view found in the *PurusaSukta* of the *Rg. Veda*. It is maintained that the four varnas have come out of the four different parts of *ViraataPurusa*. The Brahmins have come out of the mouth, ksatriyas have come out of the shoulder, vaisyas have come out of the thigh and sudras have come out of the foot.⁷ It is almost clear that both the views advocate in support of the divine origin of the varnas. Let us how the scholars have tried to understand it.

Here I would like to share the view of Sethumadhavan on this issue of the Gita who has explained the verse in the following manner: “The Lord is the Creator of the four castes only from the standpoint of *maya*. *Maya* is the immediate cause of everything that happens in the relative world. But since *maya* has no existence independent of the Lord, He is said to be the Creator. The Lord with reference to the mind and intellect is the creator of the temperaments although in His essential nature He is not the Doer or the Creator because He is the changeless and all-pervading irrespective of what happens in the creation.”⁸

In this explanation of Sethumadhavan one can very well see the emphasis has been attached more on the relation between the creator and the creation. Attaching importance on the greatness of the creator happens to be one of the most significant features of the theological framework. This is what is seen in this explanation. More over the introduction of the concept *maya* appears to be forced one and instead of clarifying the issue it mystifies. The only factor important in the theological framework is not to affect the supremacy of the supreme reality. While using the language care is taken to safe-guard this aspect. No matter if there is over dose of mysticism or metaphysics.

I would like to cite another explanation of the referred verse of the Gita. “The Lord is the creator of everything. Everything is born of Him, everything is sustained by Him, and everything after annihilation rests on Him. He is therefore the creator of the four divisions of the social order, beginning with the intelligent class of men, technically called *braahmanas* due to their being situated in the mode of goodness. Next is the administrative class, technically being called the *ksatriyas* due to their being situated in the mode of passion. The mercantile me called the *vaisyas*, are situated in the mixed mode of passion and ignorance, and the *sudras* or laborer class are situated in the ignorant mode of material nature.”⁹ This is an explanation

found to be very much appealing in theological sphere. God while creating different classes has taken into account in which mode a person is being situated. The approach is no doubt very novel. But selection of the three modes, namely, goodness, passion and ignorance appears to be arbitrary selection. Why *brahmana* should only be treated as being placed in the mode of goodness? Definitely it appears to be arbitrary. But in a theological framework arbitrary imposition in the name of the supreme is rather appreciated than depreciated. It is because the supreme is always taken for granted as beyond the challenging factors.

But the major problem with this explanation that here the factor of gradation among classes is quite prominent. Not only among the four classes *brahmanas* are treated to be most superior, there is scope to become superior to *brahmanas* also. Even though Prabhupada's explanation appears theologically appealing but he has deviated from the main content in recommending five-fold order instead of four-fold. The consideration that Krishna is beyond the classification is quite obvious as He is transcendental to the system. But there can be new category that is a person being elevated to the level of Krishna consciousness is treated as a *vaishnava* or Krishna conscious people who is superior to *Brahmans*. He writes that "But a man who transcends the limited knowledge of a *brahmana* and reaches the knowledge of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Srikrishna, becomes a person in Krishna consciousness-or, in other words, a Vaishnava."¹⁰

Generally considering in this account the caste of the person is decided on the basis of the caste of his parent. The *brahmin's* son becomes *brahmin* and *sudra's* son becomes *sudra*. So it does not give scope to take the aptitude of the individual into account. But the individual learns the technique of his family profession easily being the member of the family.

Estimate

The acceptance of the divine origin theory in the long run has created such a psyche of gradation resulting in many types of unwarranted social disorder and exploitation. In this account the efficiency and aptitude of a person is not given importance. A good carpenter's son need not be a good carpenter or might not be interested in carpentry. So also the case is with the people of the other classes. In fact the theistic account is primarily attaching emphasis on the theological head and it does not give scope to take note of the moral and sociological implications. The primary echo behind it is that God has created this division, so one has to accept it without any questioning. The major thrust is on the view that the four varnas are created to perform four different duties. So it is obligatory on religious grounds to observe the *svadharma*.

(ii) The Natural origin theory

This theory claims that the classes have come to existence in a natural way

along with the progress of the society. Any super natural power has nothing to contribute for the origin of classes. The undivided mass of the mankind was divided to some groups according as to their need and circumstances. In this respect the following two stands are found to be popular.

The need based sociological stand

It is claimed that when tried to live a systematic living the unclassified society must be in need of certain people who should be intelligent enough to guide society. For that purpose they must have interest in pursuing knowledge. The society also must be in need of some people who should be capable of protecting the society from outside enemies and also to see that people are disciplined in the society. Further the society must be in need of a group of people who have interest in procuring essential commodities from outside and also to dispose the surplus commodities of the society outside instead of allowing to destroy. Lastly, the society must be in need of a group of people to do physical works to obtain food materials for the members of the society. These four basic needs of the society would have divided the unclassified mass to four classes in order to meet the basic requirement of the society. The available four classes, namely, *braahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya* and *sudra* are the product of the four basic needs of the society. This classification is treated the classification on functional basis although later on many more divisions came up on various grounds.

Physiological- structure basis or efficiency based stand

It is also maintained by some scholars that man represents a miniature universe. The nature of man and the nature of the universe can be treated along the same lines. Man is the integrated whole of the four aspects, namely, body, mind, intellect and soul. These four are not found in equal proportion with everyone. An individual strongly possessing any one of these four aspects is found to be specialized in some particular front. For example, the richness of bodily aspect makes some one capable of doing more physical works. The other aspects make the individuals more capable in business, administration and knowledge pursuits respectively. Here efficiency is taken into account on the basis of the physiological structure of the individual. Some don't attach emphasis on the physiological structure but emphasize on the efficiency of the being to be grouped in a class. For them the efficiency in four different fronts lead to four different castes. The origin of the caste is natural but not super natural. This stand may be treated as a modified version of the previous theory. However in both the explanations coming under natural origin theory seems to advocate that it is morally obligatory to perform the *svadharma*.

It is most important to point out that in the recent days many scholars are found to be inclined to present a compromising stand in respect of the Gita's view of *svadharma* that even though the classes are created by Srikrishna but the creation

of classes is not arbitrary. Srikrishna while creating the castes has not utilized his arbitrary power rather has taken 'need' and 'efficiency' into consideration. In order to establish this stand the most important factor is to attaching importance on the expression: *guna karma vibhaagashah*. There has been the introduction of a further ground in the Gita that the *svabhaavad* determines the *svadharma*. Taking this aspect into consideration Arjuna has been suggested by Srikrishna to solve his dilemma regarding his future course of action in the battle field. By disposition and ability Arjuna is *ksatriya*. So it is his *svadharmato* fight. The duty is determined by the station in life. One is not allowed to run away from his bounden duty in order to preserve the cosmic order (dharma). It is very much clear in the definition of the term 'dharma' that one shall remain protected in protecting dharma (*dharma raksatiraksitah*). It is the reason it has been said that "better is the death in the fulfillment of one's own duty than to invite disastrous consequence by adhering to other's duty."¹¹

Even though I. C. Sharma has talked about the physiological structural aspect of man but he seems to have supporting this compromising stand. In the context of the vedic source of accepting the four varnas he writes that "The social psychology of the Vedas therefore, divides society into four classes: *sudras, vaisyas, ksatriyas and brahmanas*. It must be remembered here that these classes are not at all based on birth or any economic or religious distinction."¹² In this vain Gita' view can also not be treated as purely theological.

(Footnotes)

- ¹ SBG, IV,7 (*yadaayadaa hi dharmasyaglaanirbhavati bhaarata abhyuttha anamadharmasyatadaa 'tmaanamsrijaamyaham*)
- ² Kane. P.V., *History of Dharama Sastra*, Introduction,
- ³ Dandekar, R.N., *Exercises in Indology*, Delhi, 1981, p.345.
- ⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, (1st series), p.31.
- ⁵ SBG-35/III
- ⁶ SBG-13/IV
- ⁷ *brahmanasyamukhamaasitvaahuraajanyahkrutahuruutadasyayab daisyahpadab hyaamsudraajaayata*
- ⁸ T.N.Sethumadhavan, *Bhagavad Gita*, Chap. IV, p.8
- ⁹ Prabhupada, A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swami, *Bhagavad- gita As It Is*, IInd edition 1986, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, p.210.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ SBG, III,35, *svadharmenidhanasreyaparadharme bhayaavah*.
- ¹² Sharma, I.C., *Ethical Philosophie of India*, Johnsen Publishing Company Lincon, 1991, p.78.