

ORIGIN AND MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA

Dr. Charulata Das

Lecturer

Dept. of Philosophy

U.N. (Auto) College of Sc. & Tech.,

Adaspur, Cuttack, Odisha

Email:mamicharu.unc@gmail.com

Abstract

The major crisis of the present-day society is the lack of moral character and an unconcerned attitude towards the moral values. Very few have proper respect for the purusarthas like dharma and moksa. Moksa as parama purusartha is always controversial. But the proper understanding and cultivation of dharma definitely can help in dispelling some of the major social crises. Since dharma is a very primitive concept and extremely multi-dimensional the misunderstanding about it is also very vast. In this perspective, this article is an attempt to bring out a simple understanding of the development and major dimensions of the concept of dharma.

Keywords

Rta, svadharna, varna dharma, ashrama dharma, essential purusartha

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Dr. Charulata Das

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The concept of dharma is a very old concept in Indian tradition. In order to have an understanding of the concept there is a need to look back to the development of the concept of dharma in the Indian religious and philosophical traditions.

At the very initial stage in the Vedic literature dharma as a concept was found to be the successive concept of *Rta*. *Rta* signifies the law of harmony and orderliness of the universe. Such harmony could be possible because of the follow-up of the dharma by the constituents of nature or the universe. *Rta* is such a concept that is hard to define. But it can be understood with the help of some simple examples that 'water flows downwards following the orderliness of nature. It is due to follow up on the principle of *Rta*. The concept of dharma is also very much involved here in the sense that water flows downwards because it sticks to its own dharma or nature-bound function. In this manner dharma can also be treated as the 'duty' in moral terminology. 'Water' does not possess consciousness for which we can directly say that it follows its duty. It is understood in the sense that it sticks to its functional nature. Here as the constitutive concept of *Rta* we find dharma to be referring to the orderliness of the law of nature and also to the 'essential property or disposition'. It refers to essential properties in the case of inanimate objects and dispositions in cases of animate species.

It is seen how *Rta* embraces dharma within it. Scholars have given a higher status to *Rta* only because of dharma. Hiriyantha writes that "That is *dharma* conduces to one's own well-being (*abhyudaya*) as well as to the good of others. On the whole, we may say that, from the ethical standpoint, the concept of *dharma* includes all that the other two concepts do and also marks an advance on them. It is this conception that still governs the higher life of the Indian."¹ In this view of the term dharma there is no trace of any religion-based understanding which shows that the concept dharma is not exclusively a religious term which is to the usual understanding of the term. Rather *Rta* and Dharma appear to be used as twin concepts in the early Vedic period.

The early Vedic understanding of dharma, as an ethical principle, happens to be purely non-ritualistic. Subsequently in the Upanishad level the addition of ritualistic aspects to the concept of duty was seen. It was seen in the *Kathopanishad* with the mention that the five fires (sacrifices) are the means for the attainment of *svarga*. The performance of sacrifices is treated as a *dharmic* act. In the *Chandogya Upanishad* (2.23.1) while talking about *trayo dharma skandhas*, within the first one along with alms giving and study, sacrifice has been included. Further extensions of emphasis on the ritualistic aspect of dharma were witnessed in subsequent stages clubbing with some religious prescriptions with the moral aspect of the concept of dharma. Since in India from the very beginning the philosophy has not been separated

from religion, rather found as being blended with religion, the association of 'morality' with 'religion' also became obvious.

Dharma has been defined by Jaimini as *ChondanâlakcaGathodharmah* where he seems to say that fulfilling the desires in accordance with the Vedic principles is dharma. If we stick to the social context, it is seen that the literal meaning of dharma as '*dhaaranaat dharmam*', (*Mahabharata*) that is, 'what holds together' comes to the mind to be most appropriate. Hiriyanna's remark appears to be worth mentioning that "The sovereignty of dharma is accordingly greater than that of the king or the state. It is 'universally binding' (*sarva-niyantṛ*), as Sankara says in his commentary on the passage, for it rules even the rulers."² It may be made clear that if at all there is some concern for the stability in the peace and harmony of the society that is conditional to the moral (dharmic) ideas implanted in man.

The concept of dharma has been found in the Gita as one of the key concepts and it has been used in very many senses. Although it has been used in different senses it is not ambiguous. One can find a clear understanding of the concept. Dharma in the Gita has been used in the sense of holy. Pious, justice, righteousness, duty, etc. So it appears that in the Gita dharma has been used more as a moral concept than a religious concept and the term has obtained a definite field of use.

We find the subsequent extended uses of the concept of dharma in the manner of the norm of the social setup and obligatory duty. To live in a society means to adjust to a group living where it is necessary to follow certain rules. Under this category we can think of rules of etiquette, manners, following tradition, customs etc. We can categorise those into three broad groups as, legal, moral and religious. To obey the administrative principles comes under the legal category, to perform the duties for the family and society comes under the moral category and participating or associating in religious practices like performing prayers, not to enter into a temple by putting on shoes, following rituals, etc. come under the religious category. In all the three cases the concepts of *dharmā* and *adharma* are linked as per the nature of performances. If the actions are in tune with the existing norms of the respective category then it is treated as *dharmā* otherwise *adharma*. So dharma constituted in obeying the social norms is another extended understanding of the concept.

In the Indian tradition 'dharma' has not only being treated as representing the duty-ethics but also reflects the virtue-ethics. There cannot be any doubt that dharma has been accepted as a cardinal virtue being one of the significant goals (*purusārtha*) of human beings. Dharma when considered as a *purusārtha* cannot come under the purview of obligatory actions. Neither, pursuing after *mokṣa* or the highest *purusārtha*, nor any other *purusārtha* can be treated to be the duty of a

being. Following this line of thinking Pappu³ has pointed out that Potter⁴ has done a wrong translation of *purusarthas* (aims of life) as “attitudes”, “orientations”, “Capacity for doing things in a certain way”, etc. Pappu seems to be justified in pointing the wrong translation of Potter if we take the cases of use into account. It has been advised to the students “*dharmam chara*” (Taittiriya Upanisad) suggests that it is suggested as a virtue which should be cultivated by the students. To ‘speak the truth’ or ‘to cultivate dharma’ are virtues not duties.

In the Nyaya system dharma has been linked with the concept of *Apurva* whereas it is in the Mimamsa system the emphasis has been attached on ‘action’ in the context of dharma. But in theistic approaches dharma is neither treated to be in a form of quality or action but as the grace or reward given by the Lord to the dharma followers or the performer of good deeds. In this view the scope for a wrong approach is wide open in deciding which deeds to be treated as good deeds in the eyes of the Lord. Whether it is the meticulous performance of religious formalities or living as a moral being, remains the source of debate.

Major Dimensions of the Concept of Dharma

Dharma is found to be multidimensional. It would be too difficult an affair to prepare a list of all the dimensions of the concept of dharma as used in the Indian tradition. No other term in Indian tradition has such a vast dimensional applications and significances like the term ‘dharma’. Because of the vastness of the dimensional application scholars have taken advantage of categorising according to their suitability or requirements. For example, In the Hindu Encyclopaedia, S. Bhardwaj and K. Maheswari have explained dharma through putting the concept in seven different orders in the following manner. Dharma as Cosmic order, Dharma as a social order, Dharma as Ethical behaviour, Dharma as Duty or responsibility, Dharma as Service to Community, Dharma as Self-Expression, Dharma as a means for *Moksa*.

The most significant scholar on Indian Philosophy, M. Hiriyanna has classified dharma into two categories only based on general and special obligatory aspects of dharma. He considers that there are *Saadhaarana dharmas*, which are general by nature and “which comprise acts, indicative of virtues like kindness and truth-speaking and are equally obligatory on all.” And under the category of the special obligatory aspect of dharma he puts *varnaashrama dharma*. These are “relative to one’s social class (*varna*) and the particular stage (*aashrama*) one has reached in life’s discipline.”⁵

Ten types of dharmas in the following manner are also seen: *Vyakti dharma* or the dharma of an individual, *paarivarika dharma* or family dharma (it is also called *kutumba dharma* or *kula dharma*), *samaaja dharma* or societal dharma, *varna dharma* or professional dharma, *aashrama dharma* or dharma for the stages of life,

yuga dharma or dharma applicable for an age, *aapad dharma* or exceptional/abnormal situational dharma, *raastra dharma* or national dharma, *maanava* dharma, the dharma of mankind and *saadhu dharma* or dharma for the noble people. Still, it cannot be claimed that a fully exhaustive list of dharma has been given. Many more types of classifications might also be available. It is not required to find out all those and make a list of them. Here a glance can be put on some important dimensions of the concept.

Dharma as Universal Law or Principle

The concept of *Rta* has already been pointed out to be is a concept of the Vedic period has been considered as Cosmic law. Scholars have explained *Rta* to be non-different from *satya* and dharma. In this sense dharma has been understood as the universal law or order behind the functioning of the Law of Nature. The uniformity of nature happens to be its dharma. The physical world is governed by physical laws. Nature is also supposed to follow the natural laws. These laws are supposed to follow the universal principle or order. There are no deviations in such order. Any deviation would be the cause of devastating consequences. The sustenance of the universe is said to be dependent on this cosmic order. In this way dharma represents the universal principle being related to the *Rta*.

Dharma is one of the cardinal Values of Indian tradition

In the schemata of four *purusarthas*, there the second and third are *artha* and *kama* which are in fact empirical values and the last one is *moksa*, which is also treated as the trans-mundane value. Besides the empirical values and the ultimate value there is another value whose position is found as one in their order; and it is dharma. Dharma is considered as the bridge between these two value paradigms. When *artha* and *kama* are regulated by dharma one attains the ultimate state of freedom or *moksa* because of dharma. In this sense it can be treated as the essential value among the four. The follow-up it will regulate the rest others. Without this value the empirical values will be harmful and the ultimate value is not possible.

Dharma as a Moral Law or Principle

Dharma as a moral order is too common and obvious to humans. As intentional actions human actions are exposed to evaluations from moral point of view there should be a yardstick for the evaluation. Such evaluation is done taking into account its nature pertaining to dharma or *adharmas*, *nyaaya* (just) and *anyaaya* (unjust), etc. In this manner the moral aspect of dharma is evident and clear at least in the social context. Something which comes under dharma cannot be treated as immoral.

Another significant moral link of the concept of dharma is that it is also understood in the sense of duty. So far as this duty-linked conceptual geography is

concerned it is very vast. There are a number of ways in which the concept is suffixed to signify the duty of that with which it has been suffixed. Starting from the state administration up to the family level everywhere there has been specification of the duties (dharma) and the concepts that are found to be used are *raaja dharma*, *prajaa dharma*, *stree dharma*, *purusa dharma*, *jati dharma*, *kula dharma*, etc. Besides the above-mentioned dimensions from the empirical or categorial perspective dharma is also found to be used to specify some other categories such as *vastu-dharma*, *jaiva-dharma*, *manava-dharma*, *guna-dharma* and so on.

However, in my opinion, the three significant ways of the duty-linked use of the concept of dharma are namely, a) duties of an individual (*svadharmā*) which is also termed as *vyakti dharma* b) duties of the caste (*varna dharma*) c) duties of the station of life (*aashrama dharma*). Some consider that there is a strong bond between the first two categories in the sense that the *svadharmā* is decided on the basis of the *varna dharma*. It means the duty of an individual is conditional to his caste dharma.

In the Gita, which is the most accepted one and which has maximum impact on human psyche, not only mentions that the four *varnas* are created by the Lord but the duties of each *varna* have also been categorically suggested (in three verses of the eighteenth chapter) in the following manner.

“Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness and also uprightness, knowledge, realization and belief in God are the duties of the Brahmanas, born of their own nature.(42) Prowess, splendor, firmness, dexterity and also not fleeing even in a battle, generosity and leadership are the duties of Kshatriyas, born of their own nature.(43) Agriculture, cattle rearing and trade are the duties of the vaishya class born of their own nature; action consisting of service is the duty of the Sudra class born of their own nature.(44)”⁶

Aashrama dharma

Following to the meaning of the two components like ‘*aa*’ and ‘*shrama*’, ‘*aashrama*’ literally understood as the place of rest. But in case of the term *aashrama dharma*, ‘*ashrama*’ refers to a stage of life. The supposed four stages of human life are celibacy, householder, forest dweller and renunciation respectively. Accordingly the four *aashramas* are named as *brahmacarya aashrama*, *gaarhastha aashrama*, *baanaprastha aashrama* and *sanyasa aashrama*. *Ashrama dharma* refers to the duty of the particular stage of life. Through these concepts it has been pointed out what an individual ‘ought to do’ and ‘what ought not to do’ in a particular stage of life.

To sum up as a whole ‘dharma’ can be said to be expressed as the duties and responsibilities (moral) of an individual referring to his profession and also the station of life. If it can be followed it will ensure the harmony and balance in society. Dharma upholds, sustains and uplifts the various constituents of this universe. It should be pursued as an essential *purusartha*. The concept dharma should not be understood or used in the sense of ‘religion. Of course, in a loose sense dharma and religion are understood as synonyms. Dharma as religion stands for a set of beliefs, practices, prohibitions, etc. formulated by some propounder and operated in different social setups. But the above presentation of the origin and development of the concept shows that dharma can be better understood as a regulative principle and a cardinal value. In such senses the term is ontology-specific. It would be preferred to end the discussion with the following remark of Prof. Mohanty that religion are many religions, “they are space-time contingent and bound to vary from religion to religion. But considered from the point of view of their purpose, all religions of the world share a common universal, i.e., dharma. Religions are many, but dharma is one. Religion has a history. But Dharma is eternal (*Sanatana*). Dharma as the system of seminal values points to the secular core of the sacred.”⁷

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