

# Concept of Dharma : An Indian View

## Abstract

Dharma is a Sanskrit word which carries various meanings. It doesn't carry the exact rendering of the term 'religion' in the western sense of the term. An attempt is made in this paper to bring out the significance of the term dharma in Indian concept. In Indian concept the term 'dharma' indicates human activities or duties with righteousness. It is an eternal force which directs one to follow righteous path and which protects the creation.

**Keywords:** Dharma, Duty, Righteousness, Human Behaviour

## Introduction

*Dharma* is a Sanskrit word which doesn't mean the exact rendering of the term 'Religion' generally used in the English language. S. C. Banarjee observes - "While 'religion' is rather a loose English equivalent of '*dharma*', 'duty' fails to convey all the senses in which the word has been used in ancient Indian literature. The best definition of '*dharma*' appears to have been given by Jaimini in the words '*codanalaksano'rtho dharma*', that is to say '*dharma*' consists in beneficial directions. These directions, however, are manifold; they direct us how to conduct ourselves in matters both religious and secular<sup>1</sup>, :John Mckenzie holds view as – "It is a word which is exceedingly difficult to translate and one of the consequences of this has been that unscholarly and unscrupulous writers have sometimes used misleading English equivalents in their endeavours to establish their own theories ..... Much confusion might be avoided if it were recognized once for all that the term '*dharma*' as used at any rate in the *Dharmasutras*, was applied to a conditions of things to which modern terms like religion, virtue and law are strictly speaking inapplicable .... '*dharma*' was the term which was applied to the whole complex of forms of conduct that were settled or established"<sup>2</sup>

It is a very difficult task to bring the exact connotation of the term '*dharma*' to a particular definition. In this context, we would like to refer to this statement – "Concept of '*dharma*' has played a vital role in transforming the man of barbarous nature into a full fledged disciplined human being. So much as literature has accumulated around this concept that it is difficult to tie it down to a precise definition"<sup>3</sup>

The term '*dharma*' has a very wide meaning in its use in Indian literature. Dictionaries present various meanings of the term such as "Religion, the customary observances of a caste, sects etc. law, usage, practice, custom, ordinance, statute, religious or moral merit, virtue, righteousness, good work, duty, prescribed code of conduct etc."<sup>4</sup>

The term '*dharma*' is derived from the root '*dhr*' adding a suffix '*man*' after it which means to nourish, to uphold, to sustain, to protect and so forth. It simply means that which sustains and protects the creation in a disciplined manner.<sup>5</sup> In other sense, the term '*dharma*' may mean attributes or characteristic qualities on which the identity of a thing depends. Swami Yuktananda remarks – "When '*dharma*' is replaced by the word 'religion' we miss most of its significance, for '*dharma*' is concerned with facts. It means the essence of a thing which gives it its identity. Fire has no religion but surely it has '*dharma*', that is its capacity to burn, to warm to give light. In the same way man has something very special that makes him unique .... '*dharma*' is, therefore, the source of his enduring values which never change but which have to be expressed and re-expressed under changing conditions of place and time."<sup>6</sup>

The term '*dharma*' has been used in various senses in the *Rgveda*. Dr. P.V. Kane observes – "The word '*dharma*' is used sixty times without a particle, about eighteen times with a particle '*vi*' and about fifty six times with the particles '*sva*' and '*satya*'."<sup>7</sup> According to Kane, the word '*dharma*' in the *Rgveda* is used in the following senses. When the word is used in masculine gender, it carries the meaning of upholder or supporter or sustainer (*dharma*).<sup>8</sup> In some cases the word *dharma* is used in neuter sense or in a sense of either masculine or neuter. In other cases the word is used in the sense of religious ordinances or rites such as 'agnihotra' etc. for the welfare of the gods and men.<sup>9</sup> In some passages, the word is also

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the word is also used in the sense of fixed principles or the 'rules of conduct' which sustain the existence of the creation.<sup>10</sup> In the *Atharvaveda*, the word *dharma* is used in the sense of merit acquired by performing religious rites.<sup>11</sup> In the *Aitreya Brahmana*, the word is used in the sense of 'the whole body of religious duties'.<sup>12</sup> In the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, it seems, that the word *dharma* is used in the sense of living or vital force which is the foundation of the cosmic order which pervades everything.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Taittiriya Upanisad* the term seems to be used in the sense of right, duty, discipline etc. which should be followed by one in his day to day life. This idea of *dharma* is highlighted in this *Upanisad* in the convocation ceremony (*samavartana*) while the preceptor advises his disciples to obey and follow some moral and religious duties in their day to day life.<sup>14</sup> In the *Chandogya Upanisad*, we have a passage where the word *dharma* is used in the sense of certain duties belongs to different stages of life (*asramas*). Here, in the first sense of the concerned passage, the word indicates the duties of a householder viz, study, charity etc.; in the second sense, it indicates the duties of a hermit viz. austerities etc. and in the third sense it indicates the duties of a celibate (*brahmachari*) staying in the house of the preceptor.<sup>15</sup> In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, the word *dharma* and *satya* are used as equivalent to each other. Terming *dharma* as *satya* in the concerned passage of the *Upanisad*, it is upheld that it is righteousness or *dharma* which rules even a *ksatriya*. Through the power of *dharma* or righteousness even the weak rules over stronger.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Mahabharata*, which is also termed as *Dharmasastra*, *Arthasastra* and *Kamasashtra*,<sup>17</sup> the word *dharma* is used very frequently in various senses. In the *Adiparva* of the Epic, the word is used in the sense of deity.<sup>18</sup> In some other reference of the Epic, the word carries the exact rendering of the word 'dhr' (to protect, to uphold etc.) which protects the subjects and on which welfare of the creatures depends.<sup>19</sup> In another reference of the Epic, *dharma* is said to be those principles which are approved by the *Vedas*.<sup>20</sup> In the *Bhagavadgita*, which is a part of the *Bhismaparva* of the *Mahabharata*, the word *dharma* is used in the sense of duty of respective castes (*varnas*).<sup>21</sup>

In the *Purvamimamsasutra* of Jaimini, the word *dharma* is used to mean such rites which are conducive to the highest good and enjoined and inspired by vedic injunctions or passages.<sup>22</sup> Jaimini's definition seems to carry the most intelligible account of the derivative sense of the term *dharma*. According to the definition of Jaimini, *dharma* consists in beneficial directions which are of manifold. *Dharma* directs one as an individual as well as a member of the society in both matters of religious and secular. In this definition of Jaimini, both the sources and result of *dharma* are referred to. The *Vaisesikasutra* defines *dharma* as that form which results prosperity or happiness and final beatitude.<sup>23</sup> In this definition, both the immediate and ultimate results of *dharma* are referred to.

The *Dharmasutras* and *Dharmasastras* also define the term *dharma*. The *Apastamba*

*Dharmasutra* defines *dharma* as those actions which are praised by the nobles, and such actions which are not praised by them are called *adharmas* or vices.<sup>24</sup> The *Manusmrti* also holds almost a similar view. At the very beginning of the second chapter of the book, a comprehensive definition of *dharma* is put up where *kullukabhata*, the prominent commentator of *Manusmrti*, makes a scholarly commentary thereon.<sup>26</sup> Here, in this definition, *dharma* is said to be that which is parished and practiced by the nobles from time immemorial, which is free from hatred and partiality and of which heart or conscience is the measure for determining the truth or untruth. In another reference of the *Manusmrti*, the word is also used in the sense of deity which fulfills desires.<sup>27</sup> The *Yajnavalkyasmrti*<sup>28</sup> also holds almost a similar view on *dharma* as contained in the *Manusmrti*.

We also come across some definitions of *dharma* which are one sided in character emphasizing on a particular subject or conduct of human behaviour. In the *Mahabharata* it is said that non-injury or non-violence is the highest *dharma*<sup>29</sup> while in another reference of the same Epic it is said that non-cruelty is the foremost of all.<sup>30</sup> We have also found one-sided definition of *dharma* in the *Manusmrti* while it says that *acara* (good conduct) is the highest virtue.<sup>31</sup> The *Vasistha Dharmasutra* also maintains a similar view.<sup>32</sup> It is observed that both the *Manusmrti* and the *Mahabharata* uphold that *dharma*, if protected, protects us and destroyed, destroys us.<sup>33</sup>

The word *dharma* finds a new scope in its interpretation at the hands of the modern scholars. Dr. Sitanath Goswami, after making a proper synthesis of some verses of the *Mahabharata*<sup>34</sup> where the term *dharma* occurs, comments – "By a synthesis of the aforesaid three *slokas* of the *Mahabharata* it may be cogently deduced that preservation or protection, prosperity and non-injury (*ahimsa*) taken together constitute *dharma*."<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the meaning and scope of the term *dharma* in Indian concept, Dr. R. C. Hazra comments – "The word *dharma* passed through several transitions of meaning and how ultimately its most prominent significance come to be the privileges, duties and obligations of man, his standard of conduct as a member of one of the four castes, as a person in a particular stage of life."<sup>36</sup> *Kewal Motwani*, while he discusses about the concept of *dharma* in Manu's social theory, observes that *dharma* is a social force which is something inherent in the individuals as well as other objects through which an individual or an object can be known.<sup>37</sup> Bhagavan Das maintains – "Briefly *dharma* is characteristic property, scientifically; duty morally and legally; religion with its proper implications, psychophysically and spiritually; and righteousness and law generally, but duty above all."<sup>38</sup>

From the above discussion we have a comprehensive idea about the meaning and application of the term *dharma* in ancient Indian literature beginning from the *Rgveda* to the *Dharmasastras* and the views of some modern scholars thereon. In course of time the word *dharma* was used to mean different ideas and thinking but we never have an experience the use of the term *dharma*

in the sense of 'pure religion' in the western sense of the term. In this context we would like to refer to a passage of the "Aryan Rule in India" where it is stated – "In India religion is hardly a dogma, but a working hypothesis of human conduct, adapted, to different conditions of life."<sup>39</sup>

Veena Arora mentions two aspects of the term *dharma*. According to her opinion, in external terms, *dharma* stands for the action which realizes his destiny to the full, sustains him in his life and assures his well being after death. In internal terms, *dharma* signifies the obligation, binding upon every man who desires that his action should bear fruit, to submit to the laws which govern the universe and to direct his life in consequence. That obligation constitutes his duty; and that is a further sense of the word.<sup>40</sup>

In Indian concept, the term *dharma* is used in a broad sense. It is not an act of mere worship of God or Deity, rather it teaches practising of a disciplined conduct of human behaviour in society through which every human can achieve his ultimate goal of life. Therefore, it can be termed as a way of life or way of actions of every human existence. The ancient Indian literature particularly the *Dharmasastras* and the *Dharmasutras* uphold this concept of the term *dharma*. This very real sense of the term *dharma* can easily be understood from the manifold division of *dharma* laid down in these two branches of ancient literature which are prescribed to be followed by the different *varnas* of the society and so forth. Our opinion is that *dharma* may indicate performing of some rituals of religious purpose of a particular sect of religious faith to some extent, but in wide sense of the term, it indicates 'duty' with righteousness of everybody as a member of the society. While explaining the term '*dharma*' occurs in connection with '*rajadharmā*',<sup>41</sup> Medhatithi, the notable commentator of the *Manusmṛti*, seems to highlight these very two concepts of *dharma*.<sup>42</sup> In fact, it teaches one to do his duty in life morally, ethically and righteously. It is an eternal force which directs one to follow righteous path with punctuality and therefore, one should not abandon it at the cost of any return or worldly benefit which is beautifully depicted in the *Svargarohanaparva* of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>43</sup>

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