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The Concept of Dharma in the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

In Hinduism puruṣārtha, denotes cardinal values for human society. Those are four in number, viz, dharma, artha kama and mokṣa. Among these dharma is believed to be the core of all. Dharma implies a set of cardinal values which sustain human society. Thus it has been said, dharmo dharyate praja. This dharma has been delineated primarily in various philosophical scripts of ancient Indian literature. The Bhagavad gita is one such great popular script of ancient India where dharma has been presented along with other subject matters. Thus an endeavour has been made in this paper to present the central idea of dharma as presented in the Bhagavad gita along with mention of its different dimensions.

Keywords: Dharma, Righteousness, Puruṣārtha, Varnadharmā , Asramadharmā

INTRODUCTION

In the Hindu texts Dharma, Artha, Kama and Mokṣa have been conceived as the four cardinal values. Values are person-specific. Hence, these fundamental values have been aptly termed as 'Puruṣārtha'. The concepts of 'ought' and 'ought not' do not make sense in the non-human domain. Human species have the innate potentiality to transcend a given state of affairs in order to judge it as 'desirable' or 'undesirable' and act as 'right' or 'wrong'. Dharma is central to the understanding of the value-dialectics spelled out by the Indian philosophers. The term 'dharma' is used in various senses and often construed as the synonym of religion. Needless to say that dharma constitutes the basis of every religion. Religions differ from one another in respect of beliefs, parables and observances. Religions are bound to be many because they come into being in response to man's persistent quest to grow into the higher and nobler states of existence. Dharma in the primary sense of the term connotes a set of cardinal values which sustain human society. The path of dharma is nothing but the pursuit of basic values such as love, service, sacrifice, tolerance, forgiveness, empathy, etc. The religious modes of life prescribed by a religious denomination, are directed to help the individuals to live value-centric lives. Bereft of values, social order is bound to disintegrate as it would witness the conflict of selfish interests leading to dissension and discord. Human society does not consist in merely being together but living together with a shared sense of goal and value-systems. These fundamental values are always of contemporary relevance because they lend stability to a social system where people with diverse aptitudes, attitudes, ability and achievements, live together. In this sense, dharma is a pragmatic necessity in so far as it ensures harmony, peace in the social body. In the Upanishads, Satya and dharma are used as twin concepts, former referring to righteous speech and the latter to righteous action (Satyam vada dharmam chara). Both speech and action are to be tempered by values which facilitate the progressive march of the individual towards the goal. Interestingly, the concept of 'Rta' is conceived as more fundamental in relation to satya and dharma. Both refer to the underlying universal order. 'Rta' is both immanent and transcendent. The uniformities of nature as well as the uniformities in the domain of karma are nothing but two variant expressions of the fundamental order i.e. 'Rta'. Action is more consequential than speech. Dharma is nothing but righteous action on the part of individuals. When there is decadence of righteousness (dharma) society is pushed to be the brink of ruin. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishan assures that at such critical juncture when the evil (adharma) is in ascendance and righteousness (dharma) is on the wane there is the cosmic intervention and the divinity incarnates itself and show the beckon light to the people

who are engulfed in the darkness without there being any apparent possibility of redemption. Though 'good' and 'evil' are co-eternal and there is a perpetual conflict between the two, eventually, it is the good, righteousness or truth (satyam) which comes out victorious (satyameva jayate). It is a decree of providence that those who tread the path of dharma are protected by it (dharm raksati raksitah). On the contrary, those who live contrary to the tenets of dharma meet their ruin. The war of the Mahabharata is termed as dharmayudha (war of righteousness), Kauravas representing evil or unrighteous (adharama) and Pandavas representing the cause of good or righteousness (dharma). Though the Kauravas apparently far excelled the Pandavas in size of the army, with great heroes on their side like Karṇa, Drounacharya, Duhsashana, Duryodhan, Bhiṣma etc. the fact that Lord Krishna allied with the Pandavas is significant that those who are wedded to the path of dharma are divinely protected. Kuruksetra is termed as dharmakshetra as it was the battlefield where dharma and adhama pitted against one another to settle their respective scores.

The Bhagavad gita not only adopted dharma as the preponderant principle of the cosmos but defines it in terms of the 'ought' and 'ought not' which is explicitly articulated in the concept of Varna dharma and ashrama dharma. Varna literally means the 'color'. Here, it means the unique nature of the individual determined by one's karma in the past. Each individual is unique with respect to the innate disposition and ability (svabhava). The Bhagavad gita states the duty of an individual (svadharma) according to one's svabhava. It undertakes four-fold categorization of human beings according to their svabhava namely; vipra, kshatriya, vaisya and sūdra. The dharma of each category of individuals is determined by their characteristic nature. Vipras are pre-eminently inclined to the path of enlightenment. Hence, they are to play the role of goal setters and guide for humanity. Kshatriyas by nature, are prone to the path of fearlessness. Hence, it becomes their bounden duty to extend security to people and society, at large, against the onslaught of evil forces. Vaisyas are those who possess worldly wisdom. Hence, it is their moral obligation to undertake trade and commerce which would sustain a society in the physical plane. Sūdras are those who do not possess any of the qualities of other dharmas in particular but are pre-eminently disposed to love and seva. Society requires the services of all these four varṇas for its holistic growth. The social good can be optimized only when people belonging to each varṇa perform their svadharma. Svadharma (one's unique disposition) is determined by svabhava. The Bhagavad gita cautions that social equilibrium is disturbed when people belonging to one dharma tend to appropriate dharma of others (paradhama). The cause of collective well-being (lokasaṅgraha) is best addressed only when people perform svadharma. Dharma in the Bhagavad gita is also used in the sense of

characteristic natures of the species across different categories. The life of the non-humans is characterized by instinctive urges and necessities such as the desire for food, sleep, sense of insecurity, and libidinal urges. Though human-beings share these characteristics with non-humans, what distinguishes them from the rest of the living species is their awareness of dharma and capacity to follow the path of dharma. Hence, the svadharma of man consists in overcoming the push and pull of animal propensities and following the path of righteousness. If perchance, people, by and large, take to the dharma of the animals which is their paradharma. They are bound to court greater ruin not only for themselves but also the society at large. Collective interest should take precedence over individual interest or selfish interest. Hence, it is said; “Svadhane nidhanam sreya paradharma bhayabaha.”

Varnadharma determines one’s duty in a given existential situation whereas āśramadharma defines one’s duty according to the stages of life that one lives through. Āśrama is the stage of life that one remains poised in. There are four āśramas namely; Brahmacharya, that of celibate who is supposed to cultivate the qualities of head and heart by following the principles of the physical and psychic discipline. With the passage of time as one grows from one āśrama to another one has to ascertain one’s duty i.e. āśrama dharma and remain non-compromisingly strict in the practice of āśrama dharma, Grihastha is the stage of householder when one is supposed to discharge one’s obligation for the immediate family one is born into or the family raised by oneself, Vanaprastha is the stage when one retires into a state of related contemplative life, having discharged one’s onerous worldly obligations. The stage of Sannyasa is that of renunciation when one is supposed to remain wedded to the path of complete detachment and given wholly to the pursuit of the highest goal i.e. mokṣa. Varna dharma is person-specific whereas ashrama dharma is the station (stage of life) specific. Varnashrama differs from one class of person to another sharing the same psyche and potential ability whereas āśrama dharma is uniform for everyone irrespective of one being a Vipra, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Śūdra.

Dharma is construed as eternal in so far as it is bound up with the nature of reality. Dharma is also used in the non-moral domain in the sense of characteristic property which bears the credential of a thing or a being. We talk in terms of Vastu Dharma, Jaivadharmā, Manava dharma, Bhagavata dharma. Vastudharma refers to the essential property of an object or matter. The essential property of water is to flow downward irrespective of the place it occupies, be it a river, reservoir or test tube. It has a tendency to flow downward unless it is otherwise artificially confined. Similarly, the essential property of sugar is ‘sweetness’. Bereft of its essential property (dharma) i.e. sweetness, sugar ceases to be what it is. Jaivadharmā refers to the essential nature of the living beings characterized by instinctive drives and urges. Every

living entity irrespective of its nature is subject to birth, growth, decay, and final extinction. An entity who is not subject to these phenomena is not a living entity, per se. Though human-beings share these properties with non-humans they stand distinguished from others by virtue of possessing certain characteristic essences termed as Manava dharma or Bhagavad dharma. It is nothing but the ability to discriminate between righteousness (dharma) and the unrighteousness (adharma) and the ability to follow the path of excellence (puṣṭimarga). It points to the moral autonomy of the human agent who stands at crossroads, as it were, with the freedom to pursue either the path of 'good' or 'evil'. When the path of the pleasurable (preya) and preferable (śreya) are laid out before the humans, the conscientious individuals follow the latter by eschewing the former.

“śreyas ca preyas ca manushyam etas tau samparita vivinavi dhirah
śreyo hi dhiro bhi preyasi vrinite, preyo mando yoga-ksemad vrinite”.

The pursuit of Bhagavad dharma takes the individual along the righteous path leading to the attainment of mokṣa.

The life of action involving the pursuit of requisite mundane needs is not incompatible with the pursuit of dharma. Rather human life is looked upon as a veritable opportunity to undertake expeditious march towards the cherished goal. So long as one has desires (kama) which need to be fulfilled one needs artha. But anything that one tends to desire may not be what one ought to desire (desirable). A desire is worth pursuing only if its fulfillment facilitates one's goal-ward march. This is possible only when kama is regulated by principles of dharma. Dharma reminds one of the ultimate goal and helps one judge whether and to what extent what one desires is worth desiring. If the desired object is the end artha remains as means. One should also ascertain the moral worth of the means. This is possible only when the pursuit of artha is tempered by the awareness of dharma. In other words, the worthwhileness of kama and artha is determined by dharma. In this sense, dharma can be seen as the regulative principle. On the contrary, the unbridled pursuit of kama and artha prove to be self-defeating and retrograde. In other words, the attainment of mokṣa calls for the pursuit of artha and kama according to dharma. In this sense, dharma stands paramount among the Puruṣarthas, the four-fold value schemata espoused by Indian scholars.

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