

Concept of Dharma with Special Reference to Manusmṛti

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Abstract

The aspect of dharma or righteousness plays a supreme and distinguished role in making and regulating human behaviour. Practice of dharma or right action not only makes the human personality bright rather than it helps the society in term of prosperity and peacefulness as a whole. Our ancient scriptures have defined the term dharma in different angles as per their convenience. Even we can find the same concept where Lord Śrīkr̥ṣṇa has given a vivid description of human dharma through Arjuna to the human society. Among the scriptures those profound the system of righteousness, Manusmṛti definitely is placed ahead as the entire work mostly deals with human code of conduct. Sometimes we mingle dharma with religion, but from the realistic point of view dharma is the righteous action where religion a limited one. The former is used in an expanded manner where as the later is used in a narrow sense. All these aspects including other essences of dharma will be analyzed in this research paper.

KEYWORDS: society, dharma, religion, benevolence, peacefulness, definition, eternity, etymological, foolishness, beliefs, disturbance

Introduction

Among the Smṛti literatures, Manusmṛti stands unique in order to supply the necessary evidences for establishing a smooth and peaceful society. More over Manusmṛti is deemed to be the best and oldest codification of rules of dharma which is a comprehensive term for all rules of righteous conduct in every sphere of human activities. Dharma is the only aspect of the creation that regulates the rights and duties of every individual in order to ensure peace and happiness for all, by harmonizing the interests of the individuals and the society. Even in Śrīmad Bhagavat Gitā, Lord Śrīkr̥ṣṇa declares that the less amount of dharma (meritorious deeds) has the power to protect somebody from a great danger.

Swalpaṃapyasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt.1

Dharma and Religion

It is quite difficult to give a clear cut definition to the term dharma as different opinions have been furnished by various scholars from the very beginning of the creation regarding the concept of dharma. But when we look into the matter, it is seen from the root of the term dharma that it has not been made rather than it is created ultimately. Dharma is the root source of the creation. The term dharma is not a modern entity that we can give our own definition. It is that term which is used in the sense of eternity. It is not subject to change or manifest. It was, it is and will be forever whether all human beings

would forget it because the entire creation is running by the rules and regulations of dharma. Dharma is not such an aspect that has taken birth from somebody else. It is regarded as eternal, infinite and without end. It is quite impossible to translate the word dharma in any other language as it itself got its etymological meaning. And moreover Sanskrit terms are internally and etymologically identified. It will be our foolishness if we do so. Such will be clear when we look into the etymological meaning of dharma made by Veda Vyāsa in the Mahābhāratam –

**Dhāraṇāt dharma ityāhuh dharmo dhārayate prajāh.
Yatsyāt dhāraṇasamyuktam sa dharma iti niscayah.2**

When we talk about religion it seems to be manmade that creates a particular belief among certain group of people. In this way religious beliefs may be many as it is followed differently by different groups of people. Religious beliefs may differ from person to person or group to another group. But the dharma or duty or righteousness never differs. Different people from different religious beliefs are engaged in a particular work in order to perform their common duty and that is called their dharma. Hence our duty in a righteous manner is known as our dharma. Religious beliefs are subject to change where as code of conduct or dharma unchangeable and it binds the people in a thread. Religious beliefs sometimes brings disturbance to the society but such disturbance gets normality by the system of virtue or dharma. When some religious group is in danger we take the refuge of dharma. Others come forward for their protection and that is their humanitarian point of assurance. Hence in this context humanity is known as our duty or dharma. Nowhere in our ancient scriptures, we notice the concept of religious beliefs. It is virtue that saves the person from all type of dangers. Even Bhagavatgita invokes that the person devoid of dharma is equal to animals. Dharma is the basic principle of civilization. If there is no dharma, then it is the society of the animals.

Dharmeṇa hinah paśubhiḥ samānah.3

Thus, Dharma is a compendious term for all righteous code of conduct in every sphere of human activity, which is meant to ensure peace, harmony and happiness to the entire humanity. It is not religion as translated into English. Religion is only a mode of worship of God by those who believe in God. There are numerous religions, which have their own followers and have their own method of prayer or worship. Religious belief divides humanity but, dharma unites humanity. It applies to all human beings irrespective of their religion, including those who do not believe in God and consequently who do not belong to any religion. Just we can take the example of the defence of a particular country. People from different religious beliefs serve the defence system. But they never show the sense of their religious beliefs while fighting for the protection of their country rather than they get into united for the sake of the country thinking that this is their dharma or duty. Therefore the concept of dharma unites the humanity in such a way sometimes it becomes difficult to disconnect the bond. And where ever the term dharma is used in our ancient scriptures is used in the sense of peace, harmony and brotherhood instead of religion. While praising the greatness of dharma being the upholder of the creation, Manu says that –

Dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitah Tasmāddharmona hantavyo māno dharmo hatovadhī.4

Hence an orderly society would be in existence if everyone acts according to dharma and thereby protect dharma, and such an orderly society which would be an incarnation of dharma, in turn, protects the rights of individuals. Rules of dharma were meant to regulate the individual conduct, in such a way as to restrict the right, liberty, interest and desires of an individual as regards all matters to the extent necessary in the interest of other individuals, i. e. , society and at the same time making it obligatory for society to safeguard and protect an individual in all respects through its social and political institutions. Dharma regulates the mutual obligations of the individual and society. Therefore, it is stressed that protection of dharma is in the interest of both the individual and society. Manu declares that, we should not destroy dharma so that we may be destroyed. A state of dharma is required to be always maintained for peaceful co-existence, happiness and prosperity. From this point of view of dharma, religious beliefs have nothing to do for the society.

Rules of dharma

Dharma or the code of conduct was evolved with the object of enabling an individual to establish control over his desires and senses and to be contented. The rules so formulated or evolved over a long period were meant to ensure peace and happiness to the individuals and the society as well. They covered every sphere of human activity. They all together came to be called by a compendious term 'Dharma'. In order to practise Dharma, we have to follow certain rules and regulations. Unless and until these practices are fulfilled one may not achieve the path of dharma. Because dharma is not just like a belief that somebody from any group can observe it at any time. So that certain qualifications are to be achieved in order to observe dharma. The fundamentals rules of dharma are five in number as told in Manusmṛiti, such as, non-violence, truthfulness, illicit manner of earning money, purity and control over sense organs. These five aspects play a vital role for the observation of dharma. Manu nicely has expressed the same in the following verse –

Ahimsā satyamasteyam śoucāmindriyanigrahah. Etasmāmasīkam dharmam cātuvarṇyabravinmanuh.5

Out of the above mentioned five aspects of dharma, each and every aspect is essential and important for acquiring peace and happiness and to ignore the causing of civil or criminal injury to others. The first and the foremost rule is ahimsa (non-violence) which means not inflicting mental or physical harm or injury to the fellow beings. And the second aspect is to be truthful and honest in speech and action. Because truthfulness is not only observed by speech only but also some times we engage ourselves in untruthful activities by our action also which causes underestimation to others. The third is the most important one which should be observed always by the fellow beings. And it teaches us that one should not acquire money or wealth by adopting a wrong method. And the same is also quoted in the first verse of Isavasyopanishad –

**Īśāvāsyam idam sarvam yat kimcid jagatyām jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjithā mā ḡrdha kasyaswiddhanam.6**

The fourth one is cleanliness in thought, word and deed, which means that there should be conformity with the thought in the mind, the words spoken and the action performed and the last one is control of sense organs by restraining them from indulging in wrongful actions. Thus, dharma is a compendious term for all the righteous code of conduct in every sphere of human activity, which is meant to ensure peace, harmony and happiness to the entire humanity. In this way dharma stands for peace unity where as religious beliefs stand for divisions and disturbances. Dharma brings stability in society where as religious beliefs and thoughts become instrumental in dividing the humanity.

The way to practice dharma

In Vedānta Philosophy two kinds of dharma is noticed, viz; Pravṛtti dharma characterized by action and nivṛtti dharma characterized by knowledge. And these two kinds of dharma can be practiced when some body is qualified or freed from six categories of inherent elements. They are known as kāma (desire), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), moha (passion), mada (infatuation) and mātsarya (jealousy). Almost all the evil actions of the individuals which lead to the misery of others and to themselves are instigated by one or more of these enemies. They act through the sense organs which are present in every human being. Uncontrolled, sense organs instigate an individual to indulge in wrongful actions. One who does not establish control over the sense organs, is sure to go astray and suffer. Hence, great importance is given to indriyanigraha (control of senses). It is declared as one of the fundamental rules of dharma to be observed by all human beings. Otherwise the fundamental principles cannot be observed properly. And the same is recognized in Manusmṛti –

**Indriyāṇām vicaratām viśayeṣvapahāriṣu
Samyame yatramātiṣtedwidwānyanteva vājinām.7**

Hence indriyanigraha or control of sense organs is the fundamental condition in order to practice dharma. We have eleven organs existing in every individual, such as five cognitive sense organs, five active sense organs and the mind. And the mind is known as the instrumental under whose direction all other ten sense organs used to function. When the mind is subjected to control, both sets of organs namely organs of senses and organs of action will be under control. When the mind is under control and sense organs are not so much active towards sensual objects, there arises the sense of happiness and peacefulness and that is the rise of dharma which leads towards non-violence, truthfulness, austerity, etc.

**Yasya vāhūmmanasi śuddhe samyagupte ca sarvadā.
Sa vai sarvamavāpnoti vedāntopagatam phalamū.8**

Human beings engage themselves in different varieties of actions and the actions are generally motivated by desires. In order to ensure that every human action results in

good to himself and fellow human beings, the Smṛti declares that all desires of human beings should be controlled and regulated by certain rules which are compendiously called dharma –

**Akāmaśya kriyā kācidvaśyāte neha karhicid
Yadyaddhi kurute kimcittattatkāmaśya ceṣṭitam.9**

The religious thoughts and beliefs those are developed in human mind may decay at any time but the dharma or righteousness never gets destroyed because the entire creation is based on the principles of dharma alone. Everything may disappear but dharma alone will survive as it is neither created nor manifested by any one. It is natural, infinite and eternal. It is never subject to death. Ultimately, in this ephemeral world, what survives for an individual is the dharma practiced by him during his life time and not anything or anyone else, and therefore everyone should conform to dharma in day-to-day life. This aspect is indicated in Manusmṛti –

Mṛtam śariramusṛjya kāṣṭhaloṣṭasamam kṣītu

Vimukhā bāndhavā yānti dharmastamanugaccati.10

Once a person dies, his relatives cremate the body and leave for home. Only the dharma performed by him during his life time remains with him. Therefore, it is essential that a man during his life time should conform to dharma. The same is also narrated by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya in a different way in order to chant the name of all mighty to earn merits-

Yāvat pavana nivasati dehe tāvat kuśalam pṛccati gehe

Gatavati vāyyou dehāpāye bhāryā vibhyati tasmin kāye.11

Religious beliefs are personal and subject to personal happiness where as practice of dharma is not only for personal gain but also for universal benefit. A religious institution is conducted for the welfare of some bodies own or for the betterment of the concerned family but the observation of dharma is for the welfare of the entire humanity. The belief may go away but the sense of humanity will exist for ever. The observance of dharma by individuals throughout their life is essential not only for their happiness but also for the happiness of other individuals who constitute the family and society. This means everyone should live without exploiting or harassing others. Every day he should acquire 'punya' or merit of good deeds by acting in accordance with dharma without causing injury or trouble to other living beings. This alone gives real happiness. Man should conform to dharma and accumulate the merit of good deeds slowly and gradually.

The glory of non-violence has been accepted in India since time immemorial. Accepting the essentiality of non-violence, it is said by the great preceptor Manu that the human beings have been able to achieve everything by adopting non-violence only. By the institution of non-violence only we can be able to establish the system of truth, happiness and universal brotherhood. In this way we would be able to protect virtue by

taking care of the self as well as others which can be called **samanvayavāda** (system of equality). Non-violence is the root source of truth, celibacy, etc. As it is told by Manu –

**Ahimsayaiva bhūtānām kāryam śreyonuśāsanam.
Vāk caiva madhurā ślakṣṇā prayojyā dharmamiccatā.12**

By adopting non-violence the enemies can be transformed into friends. Even the crooked persons can be turned into kind hearted persons. The impossible can be made into possible by performing non-violence. By the means of non-violence, the harsh words used by us can also be stopped and all these good qualities of non-violence have been described by Manu in the following verse –

**Nāruntudah syādātartopi na paradrohakarmadhīh.
Yayāsyodwijate vācā nālokyām tāmudīrayet.13**

In this way the great sage Patanjali also has declared the importance of non-violence –

**Jātideśakālasamayānavachinnāh sārvaubhoumā mahāvratam.14
Ahimsā-pratiśthāyām tatsannidhou vairatyāgah.15**

From the above discussed facts it becomes sure that at no circumstances we should kill or hurt the lives in this creation rather than showing the sense of non-violence towards them. But the crooked or foolish fellows must be obstructed from violence in order to protect the dignity and integrity of the society and the country. It never becomes a crime if we apply violence towards these types of people, because it is done for the welfare of the society. And more over the tradition of our country also teaches us that the criminals, ill-treating people must be punished. For this purpose a technical word ‘Veda’ has been used in our Vedic literature. And such is called in Veda as “**Ācārahīnam na punati Vedāh**”.

Conclusion

From the above said discussions, it is certainly evident that the power of dharma is of highly protective. In the entire creation everybody is engaged in performing their respective dharma or virtue. Starting from the human beings up to the animals each and every body cannot sustain without performing dharma. Dharma means duty, in a righteous manner. Even we cannot deny the duty of the nature for the sustenance of the creation. It may be directly or indirectly, each and every body is engaged in their duties. The negligence causes harm to the society. As a particular wounded part of the body creates problem in the entire body, similarly a single mistake in the performance of the duty brings disturbances to the whole society. In this manner dharma or righteousness is the only aspect that helps the society to have love, affection, benevolence and peacefulness among the people.

Abbreviations:

1. Bha. Gī. - Bhagavat Gītā
2. Ma. Ka. - Mahābhāratam karṇaparva
3. Hi. De. – Hitopadeśah
4. Ma. Sm. - Manusmṛt
5. Īśa. Upa. - Īśa. Upaniṣad

6. Bha. Go. – Bhajagovindam
7. Yo. Sū. - Yogasūtram

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3. Hi. De. - 25
4. Ma. Sm - VIII-15
5. Ma. Sm -. IX-63
6. Īśa. Upa. - 1
7. Ma. Sm - Ch-11-88
8. Ma. Sm. -Ch. 11-160.
9. Ma. Sm. - Ch. 11-4
10. Ma. Sm. - IV-241.

11. Bha. Go. - 12
12. Ma. Sm. - 11-159
13. Ma. Sm. - 11-162
14. Yo. Sū. - 11-31
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