

Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitaha*

by

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Ancient sages of Bharata Varsha (India) had no doubts that the fundamental basis of life on earth must be based on what they defined as Dharma. In composing the great epic Mahabharata, Ved Vyasa was very eloquent in appealing to this concept as the very core value and fountainhead from which all other values issue. There is no adequate translation of the word Dharma into English. However an attempt will be made to explore this concept that has served as the beacon of hope guiding the lives of Hindus over millennia. Although this original concept evolved in ancient India, it will be seen that it is a timeless and universal concept. In fact a case can be made that at no other time did the world need an understanding of this value as the present.

The popular Hindu dictum *Dharmo rakshati rakshitaha* (Dharma protects those who protect it) has two implications in its statement. The first one is easier to understand: *Dharmo rakshati*, meaning that dharma offers protection. If we choose to live a life guided by the principles of Dharma, then we are assured of that protection. This understanding is ingrained in Hindu's thinking from childhood as one grows up in India.

How convenient it would have been if the phrase contained only the first part: *Dharmo rakshati*. It would be a simple statement analogous to saying parents love children. It would be a clear one-way street. But it simply is not so! The other part of the phrase is: *rakshitaha*. This part brings individuals and society into the action. Why was this coined? That we human beings need protection is understandable. But *rakshitaha* implies that the concept itself needs protection too. This is interesting as it conveys the need to protect the very concept whose protection we are seeking. Dharma will protect you if you protect it. Now it is an equation. Thus long ago it appears there was this recognition that we cannot simply take it for granted that Dharma will reign supreme always and that there is no danger to it. Therefore a duty is imposed on those who seek such protection from Dharma, and that duty is to take care that this wonderful governing concept of life is not in any jeopardy.

This assessment is correct because, it is naïve to think that Dharma can never be in danger. All the puranas, the epics, and a host of related literature in Sanskrit as well as vernacular languages are full of episodes in which the world fell into danger because of serious encroaches upon this concept. Ancient Indians insisted that a key measure of the wellbeing of a society is not the supremacy of Dharma but indeed the balance between Dharma and its opposite known as Adharma. Thus the question is not if Dharma is violated but the extent to which it may be. To safeguard this balance and ensure a tip in favor of Dharma requires constant care and a certain level of vigilance. By that I, most certainly, do not mean vigilantes roaming the streets keeping a watchful eye on those who violate Dharma and taking them to task! Vigilance, not in regard to what others may or may not do to tip that balance, but what individuals do to practice Dharma. So the watch is over ourselves – to see how humans behave in the course of each day as they perform their duties, interact with others, serve themselves, their family, their town,

their society, their country and the world. One must therefore look inwards and examine one's lives through the lens of Dharma.

When a large number of people in a society violate Dharma, then the society as a whole is in danger resulting in major upheaval. This was the state of affairs that led to the Mahabharata war. The power of Adharma can be such that even the strong adherents to Dharma may be tempted to give up and throw in the towel as it were. This was indeed the case with the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. As you know Krishna needed to remind Arjuna of the principles of Kshatra Dharma that required Arjuna to perform his duty on the battlefield. It is therefore necessary for us to be on guard to prevent the unbalance from becoming so predominant that the future of an entire society may be at stake.

If this concept Dharma is so vital, then we need to understand what it means. However there is much difficulty in that regard. There just isn't a one word equivalent in the English language that adequately covers the meaning of this concept. Even in Sanskrit some cryptic statements are made regarding Dharma that are not all that helpful but shed some light as to how ancient Hindus viewed this concept.

Consider for example the following:

Dharmena heenaha pashubhih samanha

The one devoid of Dharma is an animal

Ahimsaa paramo dharmaha

Nonviolence is the supreme Dharma

Yatho dharmasthatho jayaha

Where there is Dharma, there is victory

And the most celebrated lamentation of Vyasa at the very end of the epic:

Oordhva baahurviromyasha na kashchit shrnothi me

Dharmaath arthasha kaamascha kim na sevyati?

I throw up my hands and shout: From Dharma come wealth and love.

Why doesn't anybody listen?

All these, eloquent as they are, don't quite define what Dharma is. So what does one do? One may look at it from a variety of viewpoints in order to grasp the enormity of the scope of its meaning. It is like a beautiful diamond. From different angles it presents different views and perspectives, each beautiful in its own way and each just short of a total description of its beauty. Dharma is also like that.

There are hundreds of instances where opportunity presents itself for subtle and not so subtle hints in regard to Dharma. So we look again in the Mahabharata and in particular revisit the fascinating episode known as Yaksha Prashna (Yaksha Prashna, A. V. Srinivasan, Periplus Line, 2002). When the Yaksha restores the life of the "dead" brothers he asks Yudhishtira why he chose Nakula when given the choice of only one brother to be brought back to life. Yudhishtira answers "*Dharmo rakshati rakshitaha.*" Yudhishtira's logic, based on Dharma, is that at least one son of Madri should be alive as he, the son of Kunti, would.

The most central and core concept of Hindu philosophy is Dharma. All other principles and values flow from this beautiful fountain of Dharma. The word Dharma is formed from the root *dhr* and literally means to hold, sustain and maintain a thing in its being. There is no accurate translation of the word into English but we may have a glimpse of its vast scope by translating Dharma as right action, right conduct, virtue, moral law, etc. Every form of life, every group of people has its Dharma, which is the law of its being. Dharma or virtue is conformity with the truth of things; adharma or vice is opposition to it.

Further discussion of this concept must be based on the perceived need to have Dharma as a basis upon which to live a meaningful life. Here we must acknowledge two realities. One is the inevitability of evil and injustice in our world and the other is the need to obtain victory over evil. Victory in this context is general and includes what we all do our utmost to gain: victory to our side, of our plans, projects, ideas or interests. The concept of Dharma need not necessarily be tied to the belief that goodness will always triumph in the end. However since victory must be on the side of Dharma in any final analysis, we need to develop a better feel for this concept.

Additional definitions of Dharma include "any matter enjoined by the Vedas with a view to attain any useful purpose", "belief in the conservation of moral values", "a mode of life or a code of conduct which regulate a man's work and activities as a member of society and as an individual to bring about his gradual development and enable him to reach what was deemed to be the goal of human existence", "that which holds a thing together, makes it what it is, prevents it from breaking up and changing into something else ..., its fundamental attribute, its essential nature, the law of its being ...", "the code of life based on Vedas, the due observance of which leads to happiness here and hereafter", that scheme or code of laws which bind together human beings in the bonds of mutual rights and duties, of causes-and-consequences of actions arising out of their temperamental characters, in relation to each other and society etc. (On the Meaning of the Mahabharata" by V.S. Sukhtankar, The Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957, pp 79-83).

That the concept is difficult, subtle and defies easy grasp becomes clear in the Mahabharata where the patriarch Bhishma is challenged often to offer an explanation. In reply to a question by Yudhishtira, Bhishma, after explaining the difficulties in the way of defining it, gave some rules by which Dharma may partly be known. Dharma, says Bhishma, was ordained for the advancement and growth of all creatures; therefore that which leads to advancement and growth is Dharma. Dharma was ordained for restricting creatures from injuring one another; therefore that which prevents injury to creatures is Dharma. Dharma is so called because it upholds all creatures; therefore that is Dharma which is capable of upholding all creatures.

Another question pertains to the status of Draupadi subsequent to the dice game: Did Yudhishtira have a right to stake her in the game after he had staked and lost himself. It was so difficult a question that even Bhishma, the recognized authority on the subject, when pointedly challenged by Draupadi, confessed in the open assembly his inability to decide the issue. It was a real dilemma, an insolvable problem:

na dharmasaukshmyat subhage vivektutm shaknami te prasnam imam yatthaavat;

"I am unable to answer your question because Dharma is subtle"

Sukhtankar reminds us that the epic poets are in fact never tired of reminding the reader that Dharma is subtle (*sukshmam*) because its essence is concealed in a dark cavern (*dharmasya tattvam nihitath guhaayaam*). According to Sukhtankar, "the most complete and detailed information on these and allied matters is necessary if one is to act so as not to infringe the provisions of Dharma in order to lead a blameless life, as indeed he must if he desires victory - lasting victory, final victory, and that too not only on the field of ordinary battle but in the battle of life.

Are the concepts of happiness and good life in conflict with *Dharma*? That question was put to Yudhishtira, the hero of the epic Mahabharata. Yudhishtira was asked a hundred and twenty questions. I shall discuss only one of them in context. (Yaksha Prashna; ibid)

*Dharmashchaartthascha kaamashcha paraspara virodhinaha
Eshaam nithya viruddhaanaam katthamekatra sangamaha*

Dharma, artha and kama conflict with each other; How can these contraries be reconciled?

*Yadaa Dharmashcha bhaaryaaacha paraspara vashaanugau
Tadaa Dharmarttha kaamaanaam thrayaanaamapi sangamaha*

As long as *Dharma* and one's wife are in harmony, *Dharma, artha and kama* are reconciled.

One needs to keep in view all these aspects about Dharma, not only to guide one's own lives, but in the course of raising children. Bringing up a child means inculcating in the child a variety of guidelines through which he or she will develop a sense to distinguish a dharmic act from its opposite. Beyond that, an individual may be able to define the boundaries of Dharma through interactions, discussions, reading of the scriptures, the great epics, legends, mythologies, history, drama and a wide variety of stories heard throughout the formative years. These experiences help constitute personal measures and yardsticks that an individual uses in making decisions throughout a lifetime. In a sense this forms the individual's conscience and it is perhaps the only available light that guides individual actions. There are no other readily available manuals that can serve to distinguish actions.

Aristotle had a similar idea. He said "A good citizen is one, who acts in accordance with the laws of the state. A good man is one who acts in accordance with the principles of virtue. It is

likely that on occasion the laws of state may not be in accordance with the principles of virtue. In such situations, the good man will not act in accordance with them but a good citizen will have to act in accordance with them. In the best state, however, laws will be in accordance with the principles of virtue and so there would be no distinction between a good man and a good citizen." But what do we do when there is in fact a clear difference between these laws? i.e. the laws of state and dharmaic laws? In such cases there is a conflict in our minds. Such was the case when M. K. Gandhi was asked to vacate his seat on a train in South Africa because he was not a white man. Such was the case when Rosa Parks was asked to vacate a seat on a bus merely because her skin color was black. Such was the case when Abraham Lincoln agonized over the need to go to war to preserve the Union. Such was the case when Robert McNamara, in the presence of clear evidence in regard to the futility of war in Vietnam, nevertheless endorsed the same. There are hundreds of such situations in which each of us face conflicts. Our conscience alone is the true guide that helps us to choose. The consequences of decisions may sometimes be of historical significance affecting millions of people and changing the course of history. Gandhi, Parks and Lincoln took risks and chose what most would agree was a dharmaic path. Robert McNamara, according to his own admission, did not. In all these cases the course of history did change and the effects of decisions made by these individuals are still being felt. That is precisely the reason to train our conscience in Dharma so that we may, when called on, have the benefit of guidance at crucial times.

The concept of Dharma encompasses all aspects of our lives. Even political philosophies can issue out of principles based on Dharma. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was widely believed to have been a non-religious and scientific type, wrote in the introduction to a book (Socialism in Indian Planning, by Srimannarayan Agarwal): " In India it is important for us to profit by modern technical processes and increase our production in agriculture and industry. But, in doing so, we must not forget that the essential objective to be aimed at is the *quality* of the individual and the *concept of Dharma* underlying it."

Dharma is the first of four personal aims to be realized or striven for during the course of one's lifetime known as *chaturvidha phala purusharthas* i.e. *Dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha*. Artha implies wealth, prosperity, reputation or fame, etc. Kama implies sensory and aesthetic fulfillment. Moksha is liberation and salvation. So the Hindu says that it is one's obligation to practice Artha and Kaama with Dharma as the foundation so that the primary object of reaching salvation and a release from cycles of birth may be obtained. Clearly happiness, prosperity, and the good life are considered to be legitimate human experiences as long as they are within the framework of Dharma. If moksha is our goal, the ancient Hindus said, then by all means participate fully in the affairs of society, raise a family, enjoy the good life, serve the community ... all within the framework known as Dharma. Thus Dharma is the very core of Hindu code of behavior and Hindu view of life which according to Dr. Radhakrishnan is "an attempt to discover the ideal possibilities of human life".

How are these principles applied and practiced in the daily life of Indians? Although this topic deserves a separate study suffice it to say that a cursory glance at relevant literature shows a gap as wide as an ocean between the mandates of dharma and its understanding and application. In fact there appears to be a perpetual dependence between a younger generation and its elders in

regard to dharmic rules to the extent that “Indians often look to respected elders in a caste or family to provide guidance about dharmic rules” (p. 136, Kakar; *The Inner World: A psycho-analytic study of childhood and society in India*, 2nd ed., Delhi: Oxford University Press). This is because Dharma is not systematically taught but is expected to be absorbed. Clearly it is not absorbed if the generations do not learn the principles and obtain experience in its application but always look to elders. The subtlety implied in the expectation to absorb the fundamentals works for those endowed with high intellectual capabilities in a society. Others simply have to muddle along. That this is so is too bad and the root cause may be ingrained in the tendency to emulate alien models in society’s development. Such tendency is clearly evident in recent attempts to modernize and strengthen the economy; the very opposite of the brave attempts to throw off the shackles that bound Indians to an alien rule. Time only will tell if the ancient indigenous concept of Dharma would not be a better foundation to build a modern society. That is certainly a topic worthy of additional studies.

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