

DHARMA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLITICS

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The term "*Dharma*" is one of complex significance. It stands for all those ideals and purposes, influences and institutions that shape the character of man both as an individual and as a member of society. It is the law of right living, the observance of which secures the double object of happiness on earth and salvation. Defined as an 'inspiration from within', or 'inner unfolding of life' by some scholars and an 'external command, what custom and public opinion demand.' by other ones, it is a holistic concept also encompassing legal provisions and structure, thus forming an intricate link between the realms of history and legal studies. Though a concept originated in Ancient India, Dharma has time and again been rediscovered in modern day conscience and found its relevance and application in modern era. Hence, it becomes quite pertinent to study it in detail tracing its existence from past to present.

II. WHAT IS DHARMA?

Dharma is a ubiquitous and universal overtone subsuming and overdosing all the incidents of human life. The Sanskrit root *Dhri* is responsible for the origin of the word *Dharma* and the root *Dhri* etymologically stands for the verb 'to sustain, bear, conform and activate, thus connoting the intrinsic property or the inalienable effect, impact or behavior of a thing or substance.

Dharma is one of the four *purusharthas* that must be recognized as characteristic of Hinduism in its standard formulation: success (*artha*), passion (*kama*), virtue (*dharma*), and salvation or liberation (*moksa*). The term *purushartha*, as used in the Hindu context, means and connotes the four great aims of human endeavour- the aims and purposes of life or the fundamental aspirations of man. While *artha* and *kama* represent physical and psychological goals,

dharmā and mokṣha represent moral and spiritual goals, respectively. These four objectives are not independent of each other since an individual can realize him or herself by finding an optimum balance among these. Thus, dharma can be practiced in many ways: either as an end in itself, at the expense of *artha* and *kama* or as productive of *artha* and *kama*, or as elevating their pursuit, and finally as regulating them.

Over the course of history, the meaning of Dharma has gradually evolved from emphasis on ritual action and injunction to the expectation of righteous action at any point of one's life. According to noted scholar Kane, dharma has developed out of *rta*, which later fell into oblivion as a technical term. *Dharma* is the awareness of cosmic inter-linkage and the individual's obligation towards the universe. Originally, dharma signified nothing more than the observance of Vedic rites and injunctions. In the *Mīmāṃsā* sūtra, dharma is described as that good which is determined in accordance with Vedic ordinances. Manu added a new element to the meaning of this term, defining dharma as something which is enjoined by the Vedas and is followed by the learned who are above attachment and antipathy and to which the heart assents. The idea that an individual realises his true dharma only when he sheds off all the impurities is of fundamental importance; it paves the way for the identification of the concept of dharma with the notion of *rita* which signifies cosmic or divine order. A person who realises his true dharma establishes true relationship with the Supreme Being, the Absolute, and the Almighty.

III. CLASSIFICATION OF DHARMA:

Dharma, as laid down in the *Dharmashastras* is a tripartite scheme, classified under three branches – first, *Acara* or rules of conduct and practice, second, *Vyavahara* or the process of judicature, and third, *Prayascitta* or penance.

'*Acara*', is the substantive law of *Dharma* and encompass the duties and obligations an individual owes to his family, to the society, to the kind or state and any other social organ he may be a part of. *Acara* also lays down the dictate that a person may suffer as consequence of his righteousness, but he should never deviate from the path of righteousness or turn his thought to dishonest methods of gains. However, the essence of *Sanātana Dharma* is that though one should endeavour to speak the truth, an individual must take care to not hurt

others by telling the truth. *Acara* also includes the duty to respect his teachers, parents and other elders, as etiquette or *Shistachara* is the very foundation of *Dharma*.

Vyavahara includes the procedural laws constitution of litigating procedures, mechanisms and institutions on order to interpret and apply the *acara* or substantive law in all forms, i.e. civil as well as criminal law. Etymologically, 'Vi' means 'various', *ava* means 'doubts' and *hara* means 'removing'. Therefore the term *Vyavahara* means, 'removing of various doubts'. Legal procedure according to the *dharmasāstras* includes: court, listening to and assessing witnesses and their testimony, deciding and enforcing punishment, and the pursuit of Justice in the face of Injustice.

Prayascitta is a Sanskrit word meaning "atonement, penance, expiation". It relates to purging oneself from sin after committing a criminal or civil wrong and atoning for the same. In the context of *Dharma*, '*Prayascitta*' takes the form of penal law where retributive and rehabilitative mechanisms, as an alternative to incarceration or other forms of *danda* (punishment) is to be followed in case of violations of the substantive law.

IV. APPLICATION OF DHARMA IN POLITICS: THE CONCEPT OF RAJDHARMA

Indian political thinkers have unanimously appreciated *Rajadharma* as the sound basis of polity in India. So central is the place occupied by the concept of *Dharma* in ancient Hindu thought, that one whole book or parva of Mahabharata, namely, the *Shantiparva*, is devoted to its exposition. Bishama describes to King Yudhishtira, popularly known as *Dharmaraj*, the intricacies of *rajadharma*, which is extolled as the refuge of all living creatures and leads to the realisation of not only the three-fold end of life but also to moksha or spiritual salvation. *Rajadharma* is believed to be the means of controlling the world like the reins controlling horses. Should *dharma*, as observed by King, get confused, disorder would set in the world and everything would be plunged in darkness and chaos. In view of this vital role played by *rajadharma* in life, it is not surprising that the protection of *dharma* was regarded as the most important duty of the King, and the King, himself as the Protector of *Dharma*.

In Chapter VII, *Manu Smriti* explains the importance of King or the Ruler and declares that the King is God in human form as it is he who gives full protection to the people against external enemies and internal wrongdoers and looks after their welfare. *Manu smriti* mandates the king to support all his subjects without any discrimination, in the same manner

as the earth supports all living beings. This takes into consideration the importance of “*Prajahita*”, i.e. the welfare of the subjects, which is an essential part of Rajdharma.

V. THE GANDHIAN REINVENTION OF DHARMA

Bhishma, in the Mahabharata, states that *Dharma* is a dynamic concept which changes according to the needs of time and hence develops with society. What is *Dharma* in one set of circumstances becomes *Adharma* in another set of circumstances. However, it has certain permanent moral values like truth, compassion, self-control and forgiveness which continue to exist. It is in this context that Dharma and its three branches hold relevance in the making of modern nationalist politics. Mahatma Gandhi's life exemplifies the power and possibilities of practicing Dharma— Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* being the paramount.

Etymologically, the term Satyagraha means passion for or, firmness in Truth. It is essentially an active form of resistance, a direct action. There are four main characteristics of Satyagraha – a.) *Ahimsa* or nonviolence, b.) *Sadhana* or the impersonal motive behind the act of resistance, c.) *Abhaya* or fearlessness and, d.) Its creative power. Gandhi has imbibed and modified the branches of Dharma in the aforementioned characteristics of Satyagraha.

Gandhian notion of righteous conduct or *Acara* takes form as early as 1930 in an issue of Young India wherein he lays down the code of conduct for every *Satyagrahi*. This code of conduct takes its essence from the principles of *Ahimsa* and *Abhaya*. According to Gandhi, a person should conduct himself through *Ahimsa*, implying that the person should be compassionate, merciful, tender, sympathetic and peaceful towards the opponent thus abstaining from anger and violence. He states that, “*Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*” meaning non-violence is paramount form of dharma. The *Satyagrahi*'s motto therefore is to influence the wrongdoer not by coercion, but by gentle persuasion yet firm appeal to the head and the heart. Gandhi also confirms that a *Satyagrahi*, on maintaining his conduct, should be fearless (*Abhaya*) in nature. The *Satyagrahi* should defy smilingly, without raising a finger and remain un-subdued morally, thereby making *Satyagraha* the weapon of the brave and strong, not of the timid and the weak. Hence, harbouring no anger, suffering the anger of the opponent, non retaliation and non-submission to the assaults from the opponent are some of the forms of righteous conduct or *Acara* that Gandhi highlights in his philosophy of *Satyagraha*.

Gandhi diverts from the principle of *Vyavahara* (legal proceedings) as laid down in the *Dharmashastras* and states that the process of conflict resolution should not be through the appearance of a civil or criminal case in court. Rather, it should be through the process of conversion via *Ahimsa* and *Abhaya*. According to Gandhi, the true function of a lawyer is to unite parties riven asunder and not consciously or unconsciously, harbour and support untruths for the sake of their clients, which normally is the case

The principle of *Prayaschitta* (Penitence) finds itself in a refined form in Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi uses this principle as the Impersonal Motive, a moral power for removing injustice and transforming relationships. He states that one must discipline himself for a long time, purify himself, steel his determination, and purge himself of the last vestiges of immortality. He must impose on himself the five vows of *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non Violence), *Asteya* (abstaining from stealing), *Aparigraha* (Sacrificing Worldly Pleasures) and *Brahmacharya* (State of Celibacy). Gandhi observes, “Reason has to be strengthened by suffering and only suffering opens the eyes of the opponent through understanding.” This suffering materialises through forms of fasting, non-cooperation (including strikes) and Civil Disobedience.

Thus, Satyagraha to him is a *Sadhana* which aims at spiritual, moral, social and political progress at the same time, and the rules of discipline associated with it i.e. self-restraint and voluntary suffering constitute the *Tapasya*. The aforementioned characteristics of Satyagraha make it an active process of social control emphasizing that Truth is the ultimate Dharma.

In a nutshell, it is evident that the concept of Dharma and its three branches which are so unique to Hinduism and the Indian Society still hold its relevance Gandhi’s ideology of Satyagraha. This is primarily due to the reason that Dharma is a relative concept; it changes with time and place. But certain basic values sustain infinitely. The branches of Dharma (*Achara, Vyavahara, and Prayaschitta*) have been modified in Gandhian philosophy and have been adapted to suit the then prevalent conditions in Indian society during the Freedom Struggle. Gandhi never intended to use his philosophy as a means of national defence against foreign aggression, it was rather construed as a way of life in itself – a process of social control – imbibing the true essence of Dharma as laid down in the scriptures and adapting it to the scenario in which India was at her peak in defining herself and her countrymen.

VI. CONCLUSION:

Dharma, thus, acts as the moral compass of an individual whose life it governs. Not just an abstract spiritual concept, Dharma in its truest form leads an individual to follow the path of *Acara* or righteous conduct. It also gives chances to misguided souls who can rediscover purpose in life through *Prayaschittya* or penance.

Restricted not only to an individualistic level, Dharma, if followed in politics, would lead the society to a better, morally fulfilling future. Modern India has hardly made any progress worth the name in the direction of social justice and social security and equality because dharma no longer rules and inspires our lives. *Rajdharma* has given way to *Rajneeti* where acknowledgment of one's duties rarely find place amidst ones' pursuit for politically motivated selfish goals. In a democracy, the roles of the ruler and the ruled get interchanged and intertwined in a manner where the ruler is also the servant of his subjects. The way to build up a new social order based on the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice is to rehabilitate dharma in our personal and social lives. If we want to redeem the nation and give the poor and the needy their due, we must spiritualise our political, economic, educational and other activities. This is what Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our Nation, sought to achieve and achieved to some degree.

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