

Basic Aspects of Dharma – An Appraisal

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Abstract :

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the concept of Dharma and the code of righteous conduct which is mentioned in the written text of Vedas and Smritis. The paper discusses the attributes and common rules of Dharma which are of at most importance for securing peace and happiness and to avoid causing of civil or criminal injuries to others. If these rules are inculcated in minds of youngsters than they can lead to the righteous path and can become the real ambassador of Indian culture.

Keywords: Dharma, Manu Smiritis, Upnishad.

"Dharma" or the code of righteous 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 human society as well. They covered every sphere of human activity. They all together came to be called by a compendious word "DHARMA".

While the Vedas and Smritis were the written texts from which one could ascertain the rules of Dharma, an established good conduct or custom [Sadachara] also indicated what the rule of Dharma is, in a given case. But what Manu Smriti indicates as the final test of Dharma is extremely significant and important. That is the test of good conscience namely as to what is agreeable to the soul or conscience of an individual [atmatashti] which is the surest test as to what is good or what is bad. One may out of greed or anger or jealousy do wrongs and openly declare that what he had done was right, but he cannot deceive or convince his conscience as to what he had done was right. Hence, great importance was given to this criteria to find out what is Dharma and what is adharma.

Dharma is most difficult thing to define. Dharma has been explained to be that which helps in the upliftment of living beings. Therefore that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely Dharma. That learned rishi have declared that which sustains is Dharma – Shanti Parva of the Mahabharat. Dharma is adherence to the rule of law, moral and secular and therefore its practice leads to peaceful co-existence. Implicit in Dharma are wide range of values, patriotism, social obligation, equality, gratitude, compassion, service and sacrifice.

Corollary to Dharma of course is Adharma as explained in Manusmriti. The smiriti warns against indulgence in Adharma by pointing out that one certainly does attain immediate success and secures fulfillment of desires yet the consequence of Dharma should never be in doubt as it has the power to overpower the practitioners who ultimately ruin themselves.

The necessity of scrupulous of Dharma is forcefully expressed by mannu himself. Dharma protects those who protect it. Those who destroy Dharma not be destroyed so that we may not be destroyed as consequence thereof.

TEN ATTRIBUTES OF DHARMA

धृतिः क्षमा दमोऽस्तेयं शौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः ।
धीर्विद्या सत्यमक्रोधो दशकं धर्मलक्षणम् ॥१२॥

Contentment, forgiveness, forbearance, non-attachment to worldly matters, non-avarice, purity, control or subjugation of senses, spiritual knowledge, truthfulness and being devoid of anger are the ten specific attributes of Dharma. [CH-VI-92]

FIVE COMMON RULES OF DHARMA

अहिंसा सत्यमस्तेयं शौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः ।
एतं सामाजिक धर्मं चार्तुवर्ण्येऽब्रवीन्मनुः ॥63 ॥

Not indulging in violence against any one, truthfulness, non-stealing and not acquiring any wealth through immoral/illegal methods, control of senses and cleanliness of mind and body i.e., conformity in thought, word, and deed [Trikarana Shudhi] are the five rules of Dharma to be followed by all. [X-63]

Following of each one of the rules of Dharma is of utmost importance for securing peace and happiness and to avoid 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 injury on fellow human beings. The second is to be truthful and honest in speech and action.

The third is the most important one which directs that one should not acquire money or wealth by illegitimate methods 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 senses 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 It is not religion as wrongly translated into English. Religion is only a mode of worship of religions which have their own followers and have their own method of prayer or worship. Religion 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 God by those who believe God. There numerous in are do not belong to any religion.

There is no prefix 'Hindu' to the word 'Dharma' It came to be added only after the word 'Hindu' was given to the dwellers of the Indus Valley, by foreign invaders and the Country came to be called Hindustan Therefore, Hindu Dharma only means "Dharma" originated in this land which came to be called Hindustan, in the course of history and not religion.

Sarvajna Narayana in his celebrated work Hitopudsha (Wordly Wisdom] has in his inimitable style indicated that observance of Dharma in the distinction between human beings and animals and said thus.

आहरनिद्राभयमैशुनं च सामान्यमेत्पशुभिर्नराणाम् ।
धर्मो हि तेषामधिको विशेषो धर्मेण हीनाः पशुभिः सामानाः ॥25 ॥

Consumption of food, sleeping, fear and sexual enjoyment are the common attributes of both man and animals. But the special attribute of man is his capacity to obey the rules of Dharma. Bereft of Dharma, man is no better than or is equal to, animals.

Mahanarayana Upanishad has given a very enlightening answer to the question why Dharma is regarded supreme, in the following words.

धर्मेण पापमपनुदति । तस्माद्धर्मं परमं
वदन्ति ॥

Dharma destroys sinful thoughts. Therefore, Dharma is supreme.

The meaning is, if values of Dharma are inculcated in an individual since childhood, it remains throughout his life and acts as sextuple antigen against sinful thoughts arising in his mind on account of the influence of one or more of the six enemies inherent in every one namely, Kama (desire), Krodha [anger], Lobha [greed], Moha [passion], Mada [infatuation], and Matsarya [jealousy] and prevents him from

committing wrongs. Values of Dharma so inculcated also establishes control over the 'Indriyas' [sense organs] and prevents them from indulging in wrongful actions.

Thus, Dharma is preventive in nature as distinct from law which is punitive in nature, which comes into play after the wrong is committed. Dharma is therefore qualitatively superior and essential for maintaining harmony between an individual and other individuals viz. the human society, It is for this reason, Manu Smriti declares "Protect Dharma, it will in turn protect us, Instead if we destroy Dharma, it will destroy us". Probably there cannot be a better advice to human beings to enable them to secure happiness. The purport of the declaration in Manu Smriti is, it is only when substantial number of persons are of Dharma abiding [law abiding] nature, there will be peace and happiness. A few who commit offences can be punished by law. On the other hand, if substantial number indulge in adharma, Dharma [Rule of Law] gets destroyed as a result of which the human society concerned will suffer immensely. This is the situation which we are facing at present. Therefore, the only remedy for the present ailment is to create more number of Dharma abiding citizens.

The vastness of Dharma and its universality and usefulness to the entire humanity has been clearly explained by Justice K. Ramaswamy, speaking for the Supreme Court in A.S. Narayana Deeshitulu v. State of Andhra Pradesh, AIR 1996 SC 1765 at paragraphs 62 to 81. The conclusion at paragraph 81 reads:

Word 'Dharma' denotes, upholding, supporting, nourishing that which upholds, nourishes or supports the stability of the society, maintaining social order and general well-being and progress of man kind; whatever conduces to the fulfillment of these objects is Dharma. It is Hindu Dharma.

Therefore, the rules of Dharma should be inculcated in the minds of youngsters so that they remain with them and guide them always to tread the righteous path.

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