Dharma as the Philosophy of India: 
Some implications for a New Theory of Morality and Social Life

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The entire Hindu way of life is dominated by the concept of Dharma, regarded as eternal and revealing the divine will. According to Indian tradition, Dharma is the differentiating character of man from all other animals. All aspects of human life are enveloped within its character. The correct interpretation of the concept of Dharma, in its various implications, is the key to an adequate understanding and appreciation of the entire Indian tradition in Philosophy. The word Dharma, derived from the root dhr (to hold, to support, to nourish), denotes and connotes the same idea as is signified by the word ‘law.’ Dharma, in its widest and correct significance, implies the attributes or qualities that indicate inseparable connections between causes and their effects. In the Vedas, the most ancient literature, the word Dharma has been understood and interpreted in this most primary sense. In other cultures, religion is given priority over morality in the belief that morality springs from religion. In Sanskrit, however, there is no separate word for religion apart from morality or duty. Dharma stands for all the three. Dharma as a term carries the implication that morality and religion are inseparable. To the modern mind, in an age, in which secularism is upheld as the ideal and religion has long been ignored, such a traditional view of Dharma may appear as a dynamic force. Dharma in this sense can be a living spirit of globalization; as in our great epic Mahabharata it is mentioned, “Dharma is that which holds together the people of the universe.” Dharma, in the wider sense, is the world-order or the code of laws that bind together human beings. Universal peace and harmony are the fruits of universal performance of Dharma. Ancient civilization is only a signpost that guides us on our onward journey to newer and newer vistas of life. India, the land of Dharma, is one such ancient civilization. Dharma is offered as a signpost and as a philosophy. It is, therefore, a unique contribution to humanity on this planet, i.e. karmabhumi.

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In fact, Dharma, is one of those Sanskrit words that defy all attempts at an exact rendering into English or any other language. The word has been used in various contexts to signify a prescribed course of conduct, duty, ordinance, law, usage, practice, custom, customary observances of castes, religion, piety, justice, equity, virtue, morality, nature, character and characteristic quality. The different senses of the word appear to be divergent but there is a
common principle underlying all these different senses. This principle involves the ideas of uniformity, spirituality and truth of life.

The word Dharma, which is derived from the root dhr (to hold, to support, to nourish) denotes to a large extent and also connotes the same idea as is connoted by the word ‘law.’ Dharma in its widest and correct significance implies the attributes or qualities, which indicate inseparable connections between causes and their effects. In the Vedas, the most ancient literature, the word Dharma has been understood and interpreted in this most primary sense.3

When looked at from the conceptual standpoint, the word Dharma simply refers to the word ‘law’ in the Vedic tradition and it is called Rta, and is, therefore, the forerunner of the concept of Dharma. It is the higher metaphysical truth (satyam).4 The absolute is viewed as Self (Purusa)5 which in its nature and function is conceived as an objective and impersonal law. It is the ground of rationale of all that happens in the moral and physical aspects of cosmos. As essentially spiritual in nature, it imparts to these two realms order as well as harmony. Rta manifests itself in physical universe as the ground of determination of various phenomena. In fact, the entire universe is founded on Rta and moves within its parameters.

In the moral sphere, Rta stands for justice and truth. From the concept of the Rta, Vedic tradition has developed its notions of merit (punya) and sin (papa). Another term used for Rta in certain Upanisads is Dharma. There is nothing higher than Dharma (Dharmatparam nasti)6 In this context, it may be mentioned that there is noble concept of Deyam (Dadami Deyam) under which Dharma is also conceived as repayment of debt (rna). It is the great ethical concept of triple debt (matraya). Every individual is born with the obligation to pay three debts, i.e. devarna, rsi-rna and pitr-rna.

Performance of Dharma implies payment of what a person owes to others and to his community. The idea behind this notion is that the cosmic order and social order need to be maintained by human effort. Every person benefits from the prevalence of these orders as it is ordained that individual ought to contribute towards the maintenance of this cosmic order. Performance of Dharma is, therefore, the form in which the contribution of an individual is made towards the sustenance of the social, natural and cosmic orders.

The two orders of Being – physical and spiritual – represent the totality of phenomena governed by their respective laws. Almost the entire edifice of Indian philosophical tradition rests upon the concept of law. All laws have their own respective phenomena to regulate and govern. Every activity grounded in the spirit of law is Dharma. If it is a spiritual being, it is subject to the determination of Dharma and if it is a physical being, it is subject to the determination of Karma.

In Indian tradition, no other word is in greater use than the two words Dharma and its companion word Karma. Whereas Karma provides the material foundation, Dharma provides the form of human life. An authentic human action must have both form and matter. The world of concrete experience is a synthesis of the spiritual and the material.
A thorough understanding of Hindu view of life presupposes a deep cognizance of Purusarthas i.e. Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. The terms may be roughly rendered as ‘duty’ or ‘virtue,’ wealth or material well-being, pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction of desire and final release or salvation. They constitute the moral standards of life. Dharma is not only a regulating principle of Artha, Kama and Moksha, but is a constant end in itself. Both happiness and unhappiness are the fruits of actions, the former of action in accordance with Dharma and the latter in disregard of it.

In the Indian view, the earth alone is the field of actions (Karmabhumi) and man is the master of his own fate. His greatest asset is the freedom to do or undo, to make and unmake himself. In that sense, destiny has bounds which human effort can restrict or widen. Freedom and destiny are not mutually opposed to each other but in fact mutually supplementary. The best seed will not sprout on a rocky soil. Without the seed, the most fertile land will also remain a vast desert.

If from the metaphysical standpoint, Dharma is the law of reality, from the ethical standpoint, it is a command that is unconditionally binding on the human will. In both the cases, Indian seers and sages have used the same term Dharma. Dharma implies the whole complex of theories and the domains of practices relating to the aspirations of the material and spiritual lives of the individuals and societies. Therefore, it is significant to note that unlike other correlates in the Western tradition, the concept of Dharma in Indian tradition has a dual referential meaning and relationship with metaphysical reality and the domain of morality.

Dharma, in the Indian tradition, is accordingly co-extensive with life. It seeks to resolve the inevitable conflict between the real and the phenomenal, the spiritual and the material, the eternal and the temporal. Dharma, therefore, lays down a way of life that aims at securing the material and the spiritual substances for the individual and society. It is a unique joint product of the speculative and the practical wisdom of the Indian tradition. It has been said that man does not live by bread alone. Against this view, there is a well-known saying that philosophy bakes no man’s bread. We need both theory and praxis, which is also the core belief of the concept of Dharma.

Dharma, in this sense, is an absolute value from the standpoint of conceptual determinations. It is also a concrete and a positive reality – conceived as the unity of form and matter, of essence and being. The governing spirit of Dharma is immanent in every aspect of the universe and is the basis of harmony, order and justice. The entire universe is a living body, of which Dharma is the soul. It is the governing principle of intelligence, the sovereign law and the principal form of eternal justice. The highest compliment that one can pay to an individual, is to say, that he is a man of Dharma. It is interesting to observe that the deity symbolizing death is called Dharmaraja and he is the dispenser of justice, without fear or favour. The importance of Dharma can be seen by the voluminous literature in India produced over the centuries. As a result we have a very elaborate textual collection called Dharmasastra, the science of Dharma itself.
“Natural Selection,’ ‘Survival of the fittest’ and such other postulates attain a wider meaning within the framework of the Vedic authority of Dharma or moral law. The foundations of moral order in human society have been dealt with in the Dharmasastra. It is man’s reason that investigates this law and reason, and is also satisfied by the validity of law. It is not anti-rational. However, in a sense it may be super-rational. Reason can comprehend what is super-rational. This is the great value of our Dharmasastra.

Since life, according to the Indian tradition, is only a link between the two eternities, the heed to stress the past and future, is as relevant as the emphasis on personal and social obligations. The whole life of man, considered in the perspective of an individual and social being and in terms of his relation to his fellow beings to the rest of creation and to cosmos, comes within the purview of Dharma.

Among the duties that Dharma lays down are both self-regarding and other regarding i.e. altruistic, to the living and to the dead, to those who are alive, and those who are yet to be born. The inter-connection existing between all beings in the universe establishes obligations to all those who are contemporaries, humans, super-humans and sub-humans.

Dharma is the basis of the duty to make the five great sacrifices (punca mahayajna) every day. Firstly there is the brahmayajna, which is intended mainly for the preservation of the sacred learning. Second pitr yajna is dedicated to the ancestors, which plays a very significant role in Indian tradition. It serves to remind us of our part as a necessary link in the chain of historical and cultural continuity.

The third devayajna, the sacrifice to gods, is symbolic of the recognition, with gratitude of the fact that whatever man has and does, really belongs to the God. The fourth bhuta-yajna, the ethical significance of the sacrifices, offered in the name of all creations of nature – bhuta – is indeed very great. It requires man to share his possessions with the needy fellow-beings. As a seer of Rgveda says, “He becomes the absolute sinner who eats by himself.” (Kevalagho bhavati kevaladi). The same sentiment is expressed in Bhagvadgita: “Those who cook for themselves eat in sin, and are sinful.” The last nr-yajna, is the sacrifice of bread (another name for the proverbial Indian hospitality). The concept of Yajna is beautiful, noble and gratifying. The implication is that the man has no separate individual existence and his whole life must be a life of sacrifices and duties, if he is to fulfill the internal laws of his being. It should be mentioned that Indian tradition lays much greater emphasis on duties than on rights. The duty has to be performed in a manner that harm to others, including nature, is avoided.

True value of the wisdom of ancient India lies in its capacity to solve certain problems we are facing at present. Rationalism started in European thought in the eighteenth century and developed
immense proportions in the nineteenth century. Religion was discredited. God was condemned. Faith was displaced from the community life. But reason has not contributed, in any significant way, to man’s happiness. Reason has not offered any newer solutions to problems, the origin of which is attributed to religion and faith. Man is faced only with more serious problems and reason has only proved the old Upanisadic statement:

“Fools dwelling in darkness (ignorance) yet imagining themselves wise and erudite, go round and round in crooked ways, like the blind led by the blind.”

In other cultures, religion is given priority over morality in the belief that morality springs from religion. In Sanskrit, there is no separate word for religion apart from morality or duty. Dharma stands for all the three. Dharma as a term carries the implication that morality and religion are inseparable. To the modern mind, in an age, in which secularism is upheld as the ideal, and religion has long been ignored, such a traditional view of Dharma may appear as a dynamic force.

Dharma in this sense can be a living spirit of globalization; as in our great epic Mahabharata it is mentioned, “Dharma is that which holds together the people of the universe.” Dharma in the wider sense is the world-order or the code of laws that binds together human beings. Universal peace and harmony are the fruits of universal performance of Dharma. Dharma if destroyed, destroys everything. Dharma if protected protects everything. (Dharma eva hato hanti Dharmo raksati raksatah) It is the co-operative endeavour for mutual benefit, as duties are always performed in respect of others. In this sense, all individuals are, at the same time, givers as well as takers.

Ancient civilization is only a signpost that guides us on our onward journey to newer and newer vistas of life. As Buddha said that if one clings to a signpost on the road, one is missing the very purpose for which it is erected on the roadside. India, the land of Dharma, is one such ancient civilization. Dharma is offered as a signpost and as a philosophy. It is, therefore, a unique contribution to humanity on this planet, i.e. karmabhumi.

NOTES
1. Dharmiohi tesamadhiko viseso: Canakya-niti, 8.17.
2. dhr Dharana-posanyao: Panini-dhatupatha
3. Dharmo visvasya jagatah pratistha: Rgveda, II, 2 3 17.
4. Rgveda, X. 1.90
6. Brhadaranyaka-upanisad 1.IV.14
7. Apastambha-dharmasutra.
8. Svataneh Karta, Sarvatha Karma-Swantryam; yagyavalkya-smriti.
9. Yajurveda, 5.27
11. Kathopanisad, 2.5