



SABITA
A Journal of Humanities



Journal Homepage: www.sabitajournal.com


Article

Understanding 'Dharma' as Duty in Different Indian Systems: A Brief Note

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	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords:</p> <p>Dharmas, Hindu Morality, Duties- Different Classifications, Sadharana Dharmas</p> 	<p>This essay examines the idea of "Dharma" as obligation in several Indian philosophical traditions, highlighting its significance in discussions of morality and ethics. Indian philosophy has a long history of incorporating values into theoretical and practical knowledge, with duty (dharma) acting as a key tenet that directs both individual and collective behavior. Using literature from the Vedas, Upanishads, Dharmaśāstras, and other philosophical systems, the study looks at how dharma includes both qualities and mandated deeds. The classifications put out by Manu, Āpastamba, Gautama, and Praśastapāda are examined, along with the difference between universal responsibilities (sādhāraṇa dharma) and specific duties (varṇāśrama dharma). The ethical and deontological viewpoints in Mīmāṃsā philosophy are also highlighted in the study. The study contends that Hindu ethics establishes the groundwork for universal human values by acknowledging shared responsibilities that apply to every member of society, even as it emphasizes self-purification and individual liberty.</p>

In Indian philosophy throughout its history a significant emphasis is laid on values. Here in philosophical discussion as well as in common man's parlance value has always taken a foremost place, so much so that it may be described as essentially a philosophy of value.

A distinction is often drawn between fact and value, which represents two aspects of knowledge. In other words, knowledge may be conceived to function in two different, yet closely related ways, one is theoretical, viz. revealing the existence of some object and the other is practical, viz. endeavor to attain some purpose to be fulfilled in life. In Sanskrit the former may be termed as *artha-paricchitti* while the latter as *phala-prāpti*. A thirsty traveler may happen to find a pond of fresh water, thus discovers a fact, while quenching his thirst by drinking the water is to realize a value. The Sanskrit word used for value in this context is *iṣṭa* meaning 'the object of desire' or 'that which is desired'- the ends that are sought, although

often the means to their attainment are also called so. In Indian tradition pragmatic aspect of knowledge is given no less importance than its theoretical ones. Consequently, the pursuit of value takes a central position in this tradition.

Now realization of values is sought either in the form of virtues or in the form of duties. While virtues are certain dispositions, attributes of character or traits; duties are overt acts to be performed either in pursuance of certain laws prescribed by the scriptures or for the attainment of some desired or desirable ends. While benevolence, modesty, forgiveness, kindness are virtues; reading of scriptures, serving the distressed and speaking the truth etc. are duties, either religious or moral. In the practical plane, sharp line of distinction between virtues and duties often become hazy, as the intimate relation between them is evident. To say that forgiveness is a moral virtue bears the same meaning as to hold that it is our moral duty to forgive others. Similarly having the virtue of benevolence makes no sense if a person is indifferent towards the needy and distressed. However, there is a controversy as to whether morality consists in manifesting our inner traits or character or in performing certain prescribed duties. The controversy, in other words, is whether we are to follow the morality of being or of doing. In some orthodox systems moral values are often mingled with religious values and ritualistic ceremonials get preferences. But generally, the consensus is in favor of being because without inner trait of virtuous character mechanical performance of duty is without real moral worth. Leslie Stephen (1882, p. 155) pointed out that "morality is internal. The moral law must be expressed in the form 'be this', not in the form 'do this'". The controversy goes; Kant favours the position 'duty for duty's sake'; but Frankena (1973) notes the close relationship between the morality of doing and that of being in the following words, "principles without traits are impotent and traits without principles are blind."

Without further entering this controversy in the Western front it is interesting to note that Indian thinkers used the term '*dharma*' to denote both virtues and duties. In fact, the word '*dharma*' has several connotations, but here we are concerned with its objective meaning of 'duty'. Maitra (2013, p.7) observes "the objective morality of the duties is the groundwork of Hindu Ethics. As constituting their concrete moral life, it furnishes the positive basis of Hindu ethical concepts and norms." The mediation of an objective code of right and wrong actions ultimately leads to the higher morality of self-purification, without which the journey towards final salvation is impossible. We shall therefore first consider the enumeration and classification of the *dharma*s in the sense of duty; but since virtues and duties are closely related, here we take the liberty of using them almost interchangeably.

A detailed idea of the duties has been recognised in Indian moral tradition. We can go through the lists presented from time to time by various moralists and thinkers. The Vedas and the Upaniṣads, although generally speaking, the former is regarded as a treatise on rituals and the latter as jñāna, have not failed recognising the important role of moral duties in lifting the man to his spiritual destiny. The virtues or the duties upheld there are: *satya*, *tapas*, *yajña*, *brahmacharya*, *śraddhā*, *dāna* etc. Besides these hospitality, friendship, non-violence and non-cheating are held with respect. The practice of studying the Vedas, self-control and right dealing etc. were also emphasized.

In the *Dharma-śāstras* man's *dharma* or duties are divided into two-fold, common or general duties and relative or specific duties. Manu in his attempt to systematic treatment of this

subject distinguishes between common duties, i.e., duties of universal scope and validity (*sādhāraṇa dharma*) and relative duties (*varṇāśrama dharmas*) i.e., duties relative to one's class (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). The universal duties are universal in the sense that these duties are obligatory upon all irrespective of one's age, caste or creed, i.e., duties to be performed by all men as men and not as a member of a particular community or as being at a particular station in life. For the purpose of the present writing, we shall discuss only the common duties here. Manu enumerates the following ten as the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* or the common duties:

- Steadfastness (*Dhṛti*),
- Forgiveness (*Kṣamā*),
- Application (*Dama*)
- Avoidance of theft (*Cauryābhāva*),
- Cleanliness (*Śauca*)
- Repression of sensuous appetites (*Indriya-nigraha*)
- Wisdom (*Dhī*)
- Learning (*Vidyā*),
- Veracity (*Satya*),
- Restraint of anger (*Akrodha*).

A close observation of the above list suggests that almost all the duties relate to individual's self-culture or self-discipline, although some, e.g., *kṣamā*, *cauryābhāva*, *akrodha* have got a social reference. But this social reference is only made negatively in so far as in place of recommending positive duties of social service they advise restraint in relation to society. In this connection Maitra's remarks seems to be appropriate. Maitra (2013, p. 8) comments "There is practically no recognition of social duties proper, i.e., of the duties of social service in a positive sense as distinguished from negative toleration (*kṣamā*) and non-appropriation (*cauryābhāva*). Even veracity does not necessarily imply positive social service in this sense: it aims at negative non-interference rather than positive service and it may be practised purely as a dianoetic virtue of self-culture." The morality under discussion primarily aims at the autonomy of the individual, focusing upon making him self-sufficient. However, at other places Manu speaks of some virtues which mark some concern for positive social impact, e.g., liberality (*akārpaṇya*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), hospitality (*ātithetā*). In general, it may be held that the virtues and duties enumerated by Manu relate both to individual and social morality, the former gaining greater importance.

Āpastamba (Āpastamba, 1.8.13.5) tries to give an exhaustive list of *dharmas*, which include both virtues and vices. First some of the enlisted vices are anger (*krodha*), exultation (*harṣa*), grumbling (*roṣa*), ostentation (*dambha*), malice (*droha*), untruth (*asatya*), lust (*kāma*), neglect to keep the senses in subjection (*anātmyam*), neglect to concentrate the mind (*ayogah*), excessive eating etc. The virtues, on the contrary, are freedom from the vices mentioned above, e.g., freedom from anger, freedom from malice etc. and also abstention from accusing others, non-enviousness, avoidance of accepting gifts, subjection of senses, peace with all created beings and regulation of conduct according to the Aryan rules. It is maintained that those who follow these virtues attain the cosmic soul (*Viśvātmā*). This indicates a firm belief in the efficacy of moral path leading to the highest destiny. Most virtues stand in contrast to the vices enumerated, but some, e.g., those mentioned in the last three or four are additional or independent duties. Most of the virtues or duties are meant for self-restraint and self-

purification than for positive social impact. Some points mentioned above, e. g., avoiding excessive eating, practising concentration of mind etc. seems to have no connection with morality. But nevertheless, inclusion of these virtues seems to be guided by the idea that moderation in eating helps maintaining a good mental condition so very necessary in cultivating good moral qualities, like subjection of senses which is directly associated with purification of body and mind. On a similar plane Manu's admission of *dhī* and *vidyā* in the duty list, although hygienic or intellectual, contribute significantly to the attainment of self-purification. Some virtues or duties mentioned above, e.g., peace with all creatures, abstention from accusing others have certainly a social reference.

Gautama (*Gautama Dharmasūtra*, VIII. 22-24) lay down a list of forty sacraments to be observed by a good man, further lists 'eight good qualities of the soul', which are as follows: compassion for all creatures, forbearance, freedom from jealousy, purity, quietism, auspiciousness, freedom from avarice and freedom from covetousness. It is interesting to note that Gautama's list begins with a very significant social duty, compassion for all creatures (*dayāsarvabhūtesu*). But again, most of other listed duties, some of which are common to either Manu or Āpastambha, are basically related to individual morality aiming at self-purification.

Yājñavalkya, in the *Smṛiti*, which goes by his name, reckons them as nine, some of which, like non-injury and charity have a reference to the good of others, and so are altruistic, while others, like self-restraint and sincerity serves to develop one's own character.

In the Vaiśeṣika tradition list of *dharma*s – both generic or *sāmānya-dharma*s and specific or *viśeṣa-dharma*s are given by Praśastapāda. His classification of *dharma*s into *sāmānya* i.e., common to all stages of life and all social classes on the one hand and *viśeṣa*, i.e., relative to one's particular station in life as constituted by one's social class and stage of life is similar to Manu's classification. Here is the list of *sāmānya dharma*s given by Praśastapāda:

Moral earnestness (*Dharme Śraddhā*)
 Refraining from injury to living being (*Ahimsā*)
 Seeking the well-being of creatures (*Bhūtahitātva*)
 Speaking the truth (*Satyavacana*)
 Refraining from theft (*Asteya*)
 Sexual continence (*Brahmacarya*)
 Purity of motive (*Anupadhā*)
 Restraining anger (*Krodha-varjana*)
 Personal cleanliness (*Snāna*)

Eating of some specified substances on special occasion for purification of body (*Śucidravya sevana*)
 Devotion to the Deities recognised by the Vedas (*Viśiṣṭa-Devatā-bhakti*)
 Fasting on specified occasions (*upavāsa*)
 Moral watchfulness (*apramāda*)

A close observation of this list reveals that some of the duties are sacramental in nature, while most others are obviously moral. The recognition of duties like regard for the *dharma*, purity of motive and moral watchfulness is significant from the moral point of view, while

that of *bhūtahitātva* speaks in favour of Praśastapāda's concern for social virtues. Although fasting has gained an important place in the Jain tradition, in the Hinduism too it has acquired much popularity and Praśastapāda seems the first to recognise it as virtue. One may doubt as to whether fasting can be regarded as a moral virtue or duty, but keeping in mind M.K. Gandhi's extensive use of it for self-purification and also a means to create mass impact for eradicating social evil and often as a political tool against the British rulers, the answer seems to be in the affirmative.

Above all, in this connection, Maitra notes one important point: "in every case the agent's positive resolve (*saṃkalpa*) must be an antecedent condition of the accomplishment of the duty as in mere external cessation or forbearance (*nivṛtti*) there is only avoidance of sin, but no positive virtue (*nivṛtte adharma na bhavati, na tu dharmo jāyate* – The "Nyaya -Kandali" on Praśastapāda's *Bhāṣya*)" (Maitra, 2013, p. 10). Thus refraining from injury to living beings (*Ahiṃsā*) is not to be understood in the negative sense of mere avoidance of harm or injury (*hiṃsābhāva*), but must positively include a resolve not to injure a living being. Similarly, refraining from theft (*Asteya*) is not just outward cessation of appropriating objects that belong to others, but implies internal attitude of disapproving all acts of misappropriation as wrong. On the same plane *Brahmacarya* is a virtue only when a positive resolve of the will not to long for sexual indulgence is taken. Thus, it is evident that duties done with a pure motive, free from all nuances are conducive to morality.

A comparison regarding generic duties enumerated by Manu (*sādhāraṇa dharma*) with that of Praśastapāda's *sāmānya dharma* reveals that the latter omits steadiness (*dhairya*), forgiveness (*Kṣamā*), endurance of physical pain (*dama*), wisdom (*dhī*) and learning (*vidyā*), while include moral earnestness (*dharme śraddhā*), refraining from injury (*ahiṃsā*), seeking the well-being of creatures (*Bhūtahitātva*) and moral watchfulness (*apramāda*). The addition of duties pertaining to refraining from injury and seeking the well-being of creatures represent the negative and the positive aspects of a more humanitarian approach towards life and frees man from the shackles of individual neutrality. "Similarly, the addition of moral earnestness and moral watchfulness and the omission of learning (*vidyā*) and of wisdom (*dhī*) are significant as emphasising the ethical in place of the dianoetic virtues and thus teaching a non-intellectualistic view of morality as distinguished from the intellectualism of Sāṅkhya and Sāṅkara- Vedānta" (Maitra, 2013, p. 16). Addition of moral earnestness and moral watchfulness as virtues by Praśastapāda represents the cultivation of moral alertness against any lapses or mere carelessness.

It is to be noted that the common duties are meant for all the social classes alike, and obligatory on man as a man. It is also laid down that the common duties cannot be compromised in the discharge of specific duties. The idea behind this perhaps is that the general relation between man and man cannot be discarded in the interests of some communitarian concerns. In this sense common duties are preconditions of the specific duties.

The Mīmāṃsā classification of duties are formed on different grounds – whether based on the presence or non-presence of a scriptural sanction. The duties sanctioned by the scriptures are of unquestionable moral authority, while the sanction in the secular duties is merely human. The scriptural duties fall into two classes – the *kāmya karmas* or duties

conditional on subjective desire and *nitya naimittika karmas* which are duties of unconditional validity. The *nitya naimittika karmas*, apart from the *kāmya karmas*, are obligatory in the sense of unconditional duties, so that their non-performance would accrue sin. The *nitya karmas* are unconditionally obligatory for all times, whereas *naimittikakarmas* are unconditionally obligatory only when their *nimittas* or special occasion arises. The agent is to perform these duties for the simple reason that they are his duties. The nature of these duties is also different from the common duties discussed so far. The Prāvākara school of Mīmāṃsā takes the standpoint of ethical disinterestedness; and here is a definite transition from the teleological or consequential morality to deontological morality.

Rāmānuja's classification of duties are backed by the idea that treats God as the Moral Ideal. From the nature of the God as perfection man's duties are to be derived. Thus, the ideal perfection of the Divine Personality is presupposed in the discussion of man's duties. God or the Lord is conceived as *akhila-heya-pratyanika*, i.e., as actively cancelling all evils and imperfections of finite beings. Forgiveness, compassion, gentleness etc. are some of the ideal qualities in the Divine Person. The duties of man, in this view, are none other than realization of the divine perfections in him; in other words, the highest destiny of man is to realize his true being as an image of God. This, therefore, is an ethico-theological deduction of duties as ontologically implied in the perfection of the Divine Personality.

Undoubtedly, Hindu morality primarily aimed at self-autonomy. But it is evident from the above discussion that side by side of duties of self-culture in the various stages of life, recognition of a list of generic or common duties or cultivation of certain core virtues to be performed by every man of a community or society makes the foundation of a universal ethics of humanity. The recognition of a common human life as basis which underlies all differences and variations of caste and stages of life; prescription of certain virtues as values obligatory upon every person of a society prepares the ground of universal ethics, at least universally applicable to the members of a designated society, and not the mere sects or communities of that society. This recognition, it seems, maintains the strength and progress of the social organism. In India, doing good to others, entertaining guests, feeding the animal that frequents human homes and offering oblation to ancestors are enjoined on all irrespective of their castes and social position. Besides the assertion of five debts, *pañca ṛṇa* in the Vaidika tradition also provide a higher moral structure which prepares the individual for achieving moral ends only by going beyond himself instead of remaining confined within the stone walls of independent neutrality. The values of Indian culture are shaped by all these aspects of morality which runs through generations after generation, even amidst all the fragmented and foreign influences that has come subsequently.

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