

DHARMASTHAPAKA SRI RAMAKRISHNA

A Symposium

A. DHARMA DOWN THE AGES—ITS HISTORY

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OUR scriptures are full of eulogy for *dharma*. Who has not heard of the famous quotation from the Mahābhārata, *dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*, 'It is *dharma* that destroys (us) when destroyed; it is *dharma* again that protects (us) when protected by (us)'? Or, that famous sentence put in the mouth of Gāndhārī, *yato dharmastato jayah*, 'Where there is *dharma*, there victory also is'? Consequently we are advised in poignant terms to accumulate *dharma* in our lives: *anityāni śarirāṇi vibhavo naiva śāśvataḥ, nityam sannihito mṛtyuḥ kartavyo dharmasaṅgrahaḥ* '(Our) bodies are short-lived, wealth does not last long, death is constantly knocking at our door; (so) accumulation of *dharma* is a must.'

What is this '*dharma*' about which our scriptures and great men have waxed so eloquent throughout our history?

As is the case with many other Sanskrit words, it is rather difficult to give an exact translation of the word *dharma*. It has been variously translated as 'religion', 'law', 'duty', 'religious ordinance or rite', 'code of conduct' and so on. It can mean any one or more or all of these, depending upon the context. The reason seems to be that the word itself has been used in various senses down the ages and its meaning as also scope has been enlarged. It will be worthwhile to study this development.

It is universally accepted that the word *dharma* comes from the root *dhṛ* ('to uphold', 'to support', 'to sustain'). An oft-quoted verse from the Mahābhārata says: *dhāranāt dharmam ityāhuh dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ*, 'They call it *dharma* since it up-

holds; it is *dharma* that upholds the people (of the world).'

That which upholds this created universe, supports it and sustains it, without which the universe just falls apart, is *dharma*. Viewed from this standpoint, *dharma* is none other than God Himself. It is what the Upaniṣads describe as *sat* or *tat*, the very essence of one's being. Whatever conduct or way of life helps us to reveal this fundamental principle in us, can also be called *dharma*, though in a secondary sense. Hence religious rites, ceremonies and observances, fixed principles of conduct, privileges, duties and obligations of a man depending upon his stage of life and status in society, even rules of law, customs and manners of society — every one of these can be included under the term *dharma*.

It may be interesting and instructive to turn our attention to two more ancient words, *ṛta* and *satya*, which are closely connected with, if not forms of, *dharma*. The word *ṛta* has been used profusely in the Vedas, especially in the Ṛgveda and the Kṛṣṇayajurveda. The word in its simplest form, seems to indicate a straight or direct line and so, universal laws of nature, an impersonal order. When extended to the moral world, it denotes a straight conduct based on truth which itself is also *dharma*. It has also been used in the sense of an inner awareness of what is true, based on the scriptural teachings and the needs of the duties on hand. When this awareness expresses itself through words and actions, it becomes *satya*. Thus we see that the meanings of all the three words more or less coalesce.

Since everything in this world appears to have a beginning and an end, with an intervening period of existence, it is but natural for the human intelligence to conceive of a beginning for this creation and to posit an eternal God who existed before creation and from whom creation proceeded. For instance : *sadeva somyedamagra āsīt, ekamevādvitīyam . . . tadaikṣata bahu syām prajāyeya iti*, 'My dear (boy), in the beginning *sat* alone existed, the One without a second. It reflected, 'May I become many! May I be born!' (Chāndogya Up. 6.2.1-3). The 'many' that were created, needed a central integrating force, a law or a principle; for, otherwise, chaos would result. This law or principle is *dharma*. Even this was created by God Himself : *tat śreyorūpam asrjata dharmam . . . tasmāt dharmāt param nāsti . . . yo vai sa dharmah satyam vai tat*, 'He specially created that *dharma*, of the form of the highest good . . . therefore there is nothing higher than that . . . that *dharma* is verily *satya*' (Brhadāraṇyaka Up. 1.4.14). This *dharma* is the firm foundation upon which the entire universe stands (*dharmo viśvasya jagataḥ pratistha* — Mahānārāyaṇa Up. 79.7). Obviously here, *dharma* means righteous behaviour based on truth and knowledge of the unity in spite of the diversity, and capable of bringing the highest good to the whole creation. All other meanings, senses and derivations of this in later literature are corollaries of this central idea.

The word *dharma* occurs in the R̥gveda fifty-six times (e.g. 5.63.7, 5.72.2, 9.7.1, 9.25.2, 10.88.1, 10.170.2). But in almost all these places it has been used in the sense of duty or action which contributes to the sustenance of the world (*jagad-dhāraka-karma*). In the Upaniṣads, this sense becomes more explicit. As a member of the society each one of us has certain duties and obligations which must be discharged by performing the prescribed actions. This sustains the structure of the society. Similarly, in our journey towards perfection we have to pass through

several stages of spiritual development and each such stage devolves upon us certain duties or a code of conduct. This helps to sustain our inner development and simultaneously contributes to the well-being of the society also. The seeds of this — which is well known as *varṇa-āśrama-dharma* in later literature — are to be found in the Puruṣasūkta and in the earlier Upaniṣads also. For instance, in the Brhadāraṇyaka passage already quoted (1.4.14) there is a clear reference to *dharma* as a force that regulates even a Kṣatriya, who by virtue of his position as a ruler, could misuse his powers for self-aggrandizement. In the famous passage of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (2.31.1) the reference to the duties of āśramas is crystal clear : *trayo dharmaskandhā yañño'dhyayanam dānamiti prathamah . . .*, 'Dharma has three branches. Performance of sacrifice, study of scriptures and giving gifts — this is the first.'

Sometimes, the word *dharma* has also been used in the Upaniṣads in the sense of *apūrva* of the Pūrva-mīmāṃsā system (*Vide* Brhadāraṇyaka Up. 2.5.11 — *ayam dharmah sarveṣām bhūtānām madhu*). This *apūrva* is nothing but the subtle effect of an action performed as per the directions of the scriptures, which will produce suitable results later.

In rare cases, the word has also been used to denote the ātman or the Self : *anureṣa dharmah*, 'This Self is very subtle' (Katha Up. 1.21) : *evam dharmān pṛthak paśyan*, 'thus, considering the selves to be separate (i.e., different in different bodies)' (*ibid.*, 4.14).

In the *ācāryopadeśa* of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, the word *dharma* has been clearly used in the sense of obligatory works : *dharmam cara*, 'Perform your ordained actions' (1.11.1).

Coming to the Bhagavadgītā, we find the term used in a more definite and clear sense. Dharma is righteousness, the basis of all *puruṣārthas* (18.34). It is one's duty ordained by the scriptures as per one's *varṇa* and

āśrama, by properly performing which, man attains both well-being in this world (*abhyudaya*) and highest good (*niśśreyasa*) (*Vide* 4.8, 18.31, 1.40, 1.11 etc.). Sometimes it has also been used as synonymous with *ātma jñāna* (*Vide* 9.3) or with Karmayoga (2.40).

Let us now turn to the two epics. The very name Rāmāyaṇa has been explained as *rāmasya ayanam vṛttam caritam*, 'the path trodden by Rāma or the conduct of Rāma'. Śrī Rāma is the hero here, depicted as the ideal man. His conduct was in perfect conformity with *dharma* as taught and understood then. To such an extent did he go that he has been described by the sage Vālmīki as *rāmo vigrahavān dharmah*, 'Rāma is *dharma* personified'. To speak the truth and to keep up the promise given, under all circumstances — this is the keynote of *dharma* in the Rāmāyaṇa. No hardship is too great, no sacrifice is too great, when compared to the fulfilment of this *dharma*. Rāma had the full power and strength to vanquish Daśaratha or anybody else and anoint himself as the king. Yet he did not do it since he was afraid of *adharmā* (Rāmāyaṇa 2.53.26). To please his father and help him keep up his promise to Kaikeyī, he was prepared to jump into fire or consume deadly poison or drown himself in the ocean (*ibid.*, 2.18.28-29). He was ready to give up his life or Sītā or even Lakṣmaṇa but would never break the promise once made (*ibid.*, 3.10.19). He was not at all hesitant to forsake even Sītā in order to set up a very high standard of family life. Since his observance of *dharma* was dynamic, we can safely surmise that he set up new norms of *dharma* by accepting the hospitality of Guha and Śabarī, by refusing to have more than one wife and by forcing Vibhīṣaṇa to conduct the last rites of Rāvaṇa.

The Mahābhārata is a veritable encyclopaedia of *dharma*. It is here that the well-known definition of *dharma* (*dhāraṇāt dharmamityā-huḥ*) already quoted occurs. The epic gives a detailed delineation of the *varṇāśrama dharmas*. The dhārmic virtues like *satya* and

ahimsā are highly extolled. Performance of ordained duties, however small or mean or repulsive they may appear to be, is recommended and eulogised through the stories of Dharmavyādha Tulādhāra and the simple housewife. The idea of the four *puruṣārthas* is well developed, giving worldly life and worldly pursuits a decent place in the scheme of life. Another very interesting feature of this epic is the relaxation of the well-known moral standards and norms in times of distress and emergencies (termed as *āpad-dharma*) which bespeaks of the robust common sense of the author of the epic.

It may not be out of place here to refer to two more interpretations of *dharma*. Jaimini in his Pūrvamīmāṃsā Sūtras (1.1.2) uses the word in a very restricted sense: *codana-lakṣaṇārtho dharmah*, 'Dharma is the desirable goal or result that is indicated by injunctive (Vedic) passages.' So, *dharma* means the Vedic ritualistic actions leading to happiness here or hereafter. Kaṇāda on the other hand, gives a more liberal definition: *yato'bh-yudaya-niśśreyasa-siddhiḥ sa dharmah*, 'Dharma is that from which will result both worldly well-being and final beatitude' (Vaiśeṣika Sūtras 1.2).

However it is in the *smṛtis* that we come across a very detailed treatment of the subject of *dharma* in all its intricacies. That is why they have been rightly designated as 'Dharma Śāstras'. If *dharma* is the Cosmic Law which holds together the beings of the world and sustains them, it is very necessary that they be given detailed practical instructions about the way of life which helps them to be always in step and in tune with this *dharma*. Since human beings, like animals, are gregarious by nature, these instructions naturally have to have a sociological bias. This is exactly what the Dharma Śāstras have done when they delineate the *varṇa-āśrama-dharmas*.

True to the tradition of our motherland, all the Dharma Śāstras owe their allegiance to the Vedas. In addition, they also accept the words and conduct of saints, sages and seers

well-versed in the knowledge of the Vedas, as authoritative in determining *dharma* (*vide* Manusmṛti 2.6, Gautama Dharma Sūtras 1.1—2, Āpastamba Dharma Sūtras 1.1.1.2, Yājñavalkya Smṛti 1.7).

Since man is a rational being and since life-situations are sometimes quite intriguing, the Dharma Śāstras wisely recognised the need for reflective morality also, as for instance in Yājñavalkya Smṛti (1.7) : *śrutiḥ smṛtiḥ sadā-cāraḥ svasya ca priyamātmanaḥ, samyaksankalpajaḥ kamo dharmamūlam idam smṛtam*, 'The Vedas, *smṛtis*, usages of good men, what is agreeable to one's self and desire born of deliberation — these are traditionally recognised as the source of *dharma*.'

Hinduism considers man's life as a long journey towards perfection. In this journey, natural desires and inclinations of man to possess and enjoy the good things of life cannot be overlooked. Hence the Dharma Sastras provide for these in their scheme of life while amplifying the theory of the *puru-ṣārthas*. Great care has been taken to give detailed rules and regulations in the acquisition of *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (enjoyment of fleshly desires) within the framework of *dharma*. However, following in the footsteps of the *jñānakāṇḍa* of the Vedas, they always stress the importance of trying for *mokṣa*, the *summum bonum* of life (*vide* Manusmṛti 12. 116 to 125).

No society under the sun is absolutely homogeneous. Differences do exist. Even the five fingers of our own hand exhibit this principle. The Dharma Śāstras recognised this natural division, called it God-made and gave detailed instructions regarding the duties and responsibilities of the various groups or *varṇas* of the society towards one another in their group and towards the other groups. Stressing that these divisions were evolved due to *guṇa* (quality) and *karma* (vocation), they have also provided for stringent punishments for derelictions of duty and rewards for sincere performance. Relaxations of these

rules have however been provided for, in times of distress.

While dealing with the duties of a king, the Dharma Śāstras have given us a fairly well-developed form of Indian jurisprudence. Fairness and justice occupy the central place in all these rules (*vide* Manusmṛti, chapters 8 & 9).

In consonance with the same principle that life is a long journey towards perfection, stations (*āśramas*) have been provided in a man's life for effecting this perfection gradually. Detailed directions have been provided with regard to each of the *āśramas*.

The Dharma Śāstras have not forgotten to provide for some basic rules common to all the *varṇas* and *āśramas* (*sāmānya-dharmas*). A perusal of these will reveal to us the great stress laid on the moral life.

To err is human, to forgive divine. For the Divine to forgive, the human must make himself pure by recognising his own sins and repenting for them. The Dharma Śāstras have given us a detailed treatment of the various kinds of sins and necessary expiations or *prāyaścittas* (*vide* Manu, chapters 10 & 11; Yājñavalkya, 3.205 to 327; Vaśiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra, chapters 20 to 28).

Apart from these, the Dharma Śāstras also deal with the *samskāras* or sacraments which purify human beings, making them better fit for the spiritual journey in life.

We thus see that the concept of *dharma* has undergone a healthy evolution over the years, always keeping to the core meaning.

Sometimes it is alleged that the Hindu society is very conservative and its *dharma* (as social laws, customs and manners) is outmoded and stagnant. An impartial study of the *smṛtis* shows, on the other hand, that social laws have been constantly changed, depending on the needs of the times. Even Manu and Yājñavalkya, the earliest *smṛti-kāras*, say that when a *dharma* (a law or rule of custom) is hated or disliked by people (*lokavikṛṣṭa*) it must be given up (*vide* Manu 4.176). Throughout the social history of

India we find the rules and regulations being changed to suit the tastes and needs of the people, though of course, the central spiritual principles have always been kept intact. Criticism of Vedic ritualism by the Upaniṣads, changes in the views regarding *anuloma* marriages and food, the *kalivarjya* principle — all these clearly show that the Hindu sages and law-givers were endowed with immense common sense and that the Hindu society had always been dynamic.

Even Sri Ramakrishna who is worshipped by millions of people as the avatāra of the modern age and whose main purpose of life was to rejuvenate *dharma* by stressing the eternal values in a fast-changing society, did show us the way in the field of social reform also. Though born and brought up in an orthodox brahmin family of a small village, he

had no hesitation to accept the post of the priest in the Kālī temple built by a low-caste woman and even accept the cooked food from there because she was a devotee of God. He had no reservations for the same reason, to visit the houses of his devotees who were considered as *sūdras* in the society. He accepted quite a good number of people from all castes as his disciples and treated them all equally. He inspired Narendāra (Swami Vivekananda) to build up a modern monastic organisation which is very unorthodox and even revolutionary in outlook.

Thus the history of *dharma* from the most ancient days up to the modern period shows that it has always been dynamic and a very real force to reckon with in the life of our nation.

B. DHARMA STHAPAKA—DHARMA FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

SWAMI SIDDHINATHANANDA

*Om Sthāpakāya ca dharmasya sarvadharmasvarūpine
avatara varīṣṭhāya rāmakṛṣṇaya te namaḥ.*

DHARMA for the Individual, is the subject assigned to me. Both Dharma and individual are terms that admit of varying definitions. For our discussion we must have a workable definition for both. Of the two, the individual being primary, we have to tackle that first. Here the term individual stands for man. What is man? The question sounds silly; but as we attempt to define him, he eludes our grasp. Man is a wingless biped, said an ancient Greek. Man is a machine that converts good food into bad manure, is a Shavian squib. Man is a descendant of the Simian race, according to the prophet of evolution. These have a very poor opinion of man. Man is the noblest of God's crea-

tion, according to the religious man. Nay, man is God caught up in a carnal cage, according to the sages of India. So, his status varies from a two-legged animal to Godhead. Each view is valid from the level whence the view is taken, and all contain a certain amount of truth, though none the whole truth. Man has all the appetites of his dumb fellow beings; he is their elder brother, but he is something more than they. He has a mind that distinguishes him from them. This mind is his unique distinction and at the same time his curse. It gives him no rest. It soars high above the stars and sinks far below the depths of hell. In him meet the animal and the God, the heaven and the