

VEDIC CONCEPT OF DHARMA

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ABSTRACT

The article titled Vedic concept of Dharma clearly explains about the several contextual meanings of the word 'dharma', gender wise. It takes various definitions of the word 'Dharma' according to the Vedas. For this, it deals with the quotations given in Rigveda etc. It also deals with the term Rtam, which is a vedic equivalent for dharma, its principles and scopes.

INTRODUCTION

Though the term धर्मः is much in vogue, and the term is used as a secret principle in many of the latter Indian texts, the origin of the term is traced to the roots of Vedic Samhitas. In the Rig Vedic Suktas, this term is found as an adjectival or nominal usage. The gender of the word too seems to be not fixed, as it occurs in the neuter gender form (धर्मन्)¹, in the Masculine form (धर्मः)² and also in the feminine form (धर्मा)³.

There is no ambiguity in accepting etymological derivation of the term Dharma from the root धृ धारणे to mean uphold, support, nourish, bear etc. Hence the justification given is “धारणाद्धर्म इत्युच्यते”.

In the vedic texts, however, the term Dharma is used in a variety of meanings subjected to contextual interpretation. The predominant meaning attributed to the word is in the sense of religious ceremony. However such an interpretation would not suit in places such as “अचित्ति यत्तव धर्मा युयोपिमा मानः तस्मादेनसो देवरीरिषः”⁴. Wherein the term would mean etiquettes or code of conduct and not religious rites. In another context the term Dharma is explained as the mandatory duties of an individual belonging to the particular stage of life (आश्रमः).

“त्रयो धर्मस्कन्दाः यज्ञो अध्ययन् दानमिति प्रथमस्तपः यवेति द्वितीयो ब्रह्मचर्याचर्यकुलवासि तृतीयो”⁵

शङ्कराचार्यः commenting on this passage says that the Dharma has three divisions यज्ञ such as अग्निहोत्र, study of one's own vedic branch and charity made towards one who seeks alms outside the sacred altar. This is the first division of Dharma. Since these are ordained as mandatory for a house holder, these duties are expected to be performed by him.

The second division of Dharma is Tapas which here stands for कृच्छ्रं such as चन्द्रायणम् etc. This is intended for the people who are in the first three आश्रमाः and not for the Sanyasin.

The third division of Dharma is upheld for the ब्रह्मचारी who lives with his teacher all through his student life and who scorches his body (by practicing austerities as ordained by the Vedas).

ऋतं - Vedic equivalent for Dharma:

The Vedic concept of ऋतं can be said as the foundation of the latter Hindu concept of ethics. “ऋतं is unswerving and inexorable. As was said by वामदेवः, it is ऋतं which provides various types of food that sustain; meditation on ऋतं removes transgressions; praise of ऋतं opens our ears and awakens us to moral consciousness. While the foundations of ऋतं are firm, it has varied and fair forms, which present themselves as duties to be performed. Thus ऋतं is the principle which makes the world a universe and a cosmos. But it is realized in various ways, through the performance of different duties at different times”

Principles and Scope of Dharma:

The fundamental principles of the Dharma, which is eulogized as the “upholder of the universe”, were elucidated by the अथर्वण Veda which states as follows: - “सत्यं बृहदृतम् उग्रं दीक्षा तपो ब्रह्म यज्ञ पृथिवीम्”⁷

Here the six principles namely Satyam - Truth, ऋतं - cosmic order, दीक्षा - consecration, तपः - austerities, Brahma - Vedas, यज्ञ - sacrifice, give the scope of application of Dharma.

The three disciplines namely the पूर्वमीमांसा of जैमिनिः, the वैशेषिकदरिशनाम् of कणादः and the Dharma sastra of Manu, depict the concept of Dharma. In the पूर्वमीमांसा, Dharma is comprehended as यज्ञः or sacrifice, its performer यजमानः. The वैशेषिकाः, instead of accepting Dharma as Karma, categorize Dharma as guna (endowment).

The Dharma Sastra always declares that कर्म means action, but it is generally used to mean a certain definite connection between what is being done now and what will happen in future. Unlike Vedic sacrifices, the Dharma Sastra ordains numerous sacrifices of various kinds designating those great sacrifices (महायज्ञाः) to be offered every day. As Manu clearly points out -

“ऋषियज्ञं देवयज्ञं भूतयज्ञञ्च सर्वदा।

नृयज्ञं पितृयज्ञञ्च यथाशक्तिर्न हापयेत् ॥⁸”

They are : (i) the sacrifice to ऋषिः or the Vedas (ब्रह्मयज्ञः), (ii) the sacrifice to Devas (देवयज्ञः), (iii) the sacrifice to manes (पितृयज्ञः), (iv) sacrifice to men (नृयज्ञः) and (v) sacrifice or offering to birds, animals etc. (भूतयज्ञः). Each of these has an exterior form and meaning, and the latter leads the sacrifice on to the full life of sacrifice. The outer sacrifice to the Rishis or the Vedas, is study and teaching. The inner meaning is that all study should be a sacrifice. The outer meaning of the sacrifice to the पितृ is the offering of Water (तर्पणम्). The inner meaning is the duty of serving and helping humanity. Next comes the भूतयज्ञः. The outer meaning of this sacrifice is the putting of a little food on the ground. The inner meaning is the duty of caring for those who are beneath the human and in the lower kingdoms, the recognition of our debt to them for their service to us. These five great daily sacrifices teach man, his relations with all around him, his superiors, his equals and his inferiors⁹.

The various statements such as “अहिंसा परमो धर्मः” - “Non-violence is the supreme dharma”;

“आनृशंस्यं परो धर्मः”- “The greatest Dharma is, not causing injury”; “यतो अभ्युदयनिःश्रेयससिद्धिः सः धर्मः” - “That from which one achieves upliftment and salvation is Dharma,” shows the extension of the principle of Dharma of a moral law with spiritual discipline which guides human life.

The Sources of Dharma:

The Indian concept of morality was founded in the direct revelation namely the Vedas. Vedas have been treated as infallible authorities as they are either eternal and not a product of any being or they are the injunctions of Supreme Lord whose knowledge is immutable and perfect. Hence Vedas are treated as a source of any purposeful endeavor of mankind including Dharma- “वेदोऽखिलो धर्ममूलम्” Hence the primary sources of Dharma are always the Vedas. But the Vedic recensions being unavailable in their totality and also due to the fact that, with the passage of time, the spiritual corruption flooded the mankind, it was impossible for everyone to observe the teachings of Vedas in totality and put it to practice by understanding the value behind such an injunction. Thus the secondary sources of Dharma which evolved over a period of time made the concept of Dharma more accessible and understandable to the common man. These secondary sources in their order of prominence as an authority of Dharma are enlisted by Manu as follows -

“वेदोऽखिलो धर्ममूलं स्मृतिशीले तु तद्विधाम् ।

आचारश्चैव साधूनामात्मनस्तुष्टिरेव च ॥”¹⁰

“The entire Veda is the primary source of Dharma. Then comes the स्मृति and the character and the conduct of those who are the knower of the Vedas. Last comes the inner contentment or mental dictate of the Virtuous persons”.

There are few scholars who question the prevalent opinion regarding the acceptance of Vedas as the source of Dharma more specifically the juridical law. In their opinion the references to the concepts of law in Vedas are only incidental and few as the main concern of the Veda is in the treatment of religious rites, metaphysical knowledge, ritualistic speculations and eulogies to various Gods¹¹. However, this opinion is not only questioned but severely repudiated by many scholars.

WORKS CITED

1. Cf. Rig Veda. I. 164, 43, 50. “taani dharmāni prathamaanyaasan.”
2. Cf. Ch. U. II. 23. “trayo dharmaskandhaah.”
3. Cf. Rig Veda. III. 17.1. “Prathamāa Dharma.”
4. Cf. Rig Veda. VII. 89.5.
5. Ch. U. II. 23.
6. See Braja Kishore Swain's. The Dharma Sastra: An Introductory Analysis. Akshaya Prakashan, Delhi, 2004, p.455.
7. Atharva Veda. XII.1.1.
8. Manu Smṛti. IV.21.
9. See Braj Kishore Swain's. The Dharma Sastra: An Introductory Analysis. Preface; p.vii.
10. Manu Smṛti. II. 6.
11. Cf. P.V. Kane. History of Dharma Sastra. (II Edn.) Vol.I, part I, pp. 6-7.