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 धमः 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 (धमन्), in the Masculine form (धमः) and also in the feminine form (धमा).

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

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 “अिचि यव धमा युयोिपमा मा नः तमादने सो रीरषः” 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 (आमः).

"जयो धर्मस्यन्त: यजो अस्यस्य दानमिति प्रथमस्त:। यवेत द्वितीयो ध्रुववाच्यकृत:। कु लवाएस:।"

Shridharacharya commenting on this passage says that the Dharma has three divisions यज्ञ such as अष्ट्रयम, 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 householder, these duties are expected to be performed by him.

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

The third division of Dharma is upheld for the ब्राह्मचारी 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 वामदवे�, 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 अथवण Veda which states as follows: - “सत्यं बृहदतृ म् उं दीा ्तपो यः पृथवीम्”

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

The three disciplines namely the पूवमीमांसा of जैिमिः, the वैशेिषकदरशनाम of कणाः and the Dharma sastra of Manu, depict the concept of Dharma. In the पूवमीमांसा, Dharma is comprehended as यजः or sacrifice, its performer यजमानः. The वैशेिषका, 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 (महाया) to be offered every day. As Manu clearly points out -

“ऋिषयं दवे यं भूतयं सवदा। नृयः पितृयः यथाशिन हापयेत्।।”

They are: (i) the sacrifice to ऋिषिः or the Vedas (ब्रद्यँयः), (ii) the sacrifice to Devas (देवः), (iii) the sacrifice to manes (पितृयः), (iv) sacrifice to men (नृयः) and (v) sacrifice or offering to birds, animals etc. (भूतयः). 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 धिः is the offering of Water (वर्णम). The inner meaning is the duty of serving and helping humanity. Next comes the पृथवीयः. 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 inferiors.

The various statements such as “अहसा परमो धमः” - “Non-violence is the supreme dharma";
“आनृशंयं परो धमः”- “The greatest Dharma is, not causing injury”; “यतो सम्प्रदायति: येषसमिविद्यः सः धमः” - “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- “वेदोऽिखलो धममूलम्”

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 -

“वेदोऽिखलो धममूलं स्मृतशीले तु वेदधमाम्।
आचार्यविश भायारामामातमनस्तुष्टेऽवच ॥१०॥”

“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 Gods. However, this opinion is not only questioned but severely repudiated by many scholars.

WORKS CITED

4. Cf. Rig Veda. VII. 89.5.
5. Ch. U. II. 23.