

The Concept of Dharma as Expounded in Hindu Mythology

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Introduction

Bharat, Hindustan, Aryavrat or what we know as the country of India, is a country geographically situated in South Asia. It is the seventh largest country by land area and second most populated country in the world. It is rich in history and cultural diversity. Its history traces back to the very cradle of civilization as this is the land that once supported the Indus Valley Civilization, which is one of the oldest human civilization. Although the names of Bharat, Hindustan and India are used interchangeably, the political India today is far from what it used to be in the past. Bharat or Aryavrat was a land that covered not only today's political India but also many of its neighboring countries like Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Afghanistan. Therefore, *Bharatiyata* as a concept is very different from the term 'Indian'. 'Indian' is a political term that highlights a person's nationality while *Bharatiyata* roots from its rich culture and historicity. 'Indian' carries the baggage of colonialism with it, which today has changed the way we Indians understand *Bharatiyata*. *Bharatiyata* has in its core flexibility, the spirit to adopt and adapt. This land has seen the rise and fall of many empires and supported many religions and cultures, some of which originated here, like the Hindu or Vedic culture, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism while others migrated from faraway lands like Islam, Christianity or Zoroastrianism. *Bharat* had welcomed them all and made them one of its own. But lately many of its core philosophies and ideas have got twisted or oversimplified amidst globalization and westernization. Today Indians are caught up in a world that is losing its diversity. Slowly, the native languages and cultures are dying out and it is therefore becoming vital to hold on to one's roots.

As *Bharatiyata* is a colossal topic that requires books if not libraries to explore, in this paper I will only talk about one of its core philosophies – *Dharma*. Today

Dharma is explained simply as righteousness or doing what is right or following the right norms as established by the Vedas and society. If this definition of *Dharma* is right then the question arises – what is right, according to whom and how to determine if this right action won't result in disastrous consequences? People often question why they are facing bad consequences for good actions or why bad actions go unpunished. In recent times we often come across questions like why Lord Rama is called *Maryada Purushottam* and many of his actions fall under the scrutiny of feminism and casteism. Why is it when Yudhisthir went to *swarga* he saw the Kauravas there and not his own brothers? Why often the boons and banes in our epics do not always bring forth the results they are supposed to bring? In order to understand *dharma* one needs to understand a lot of other *Bharatiya* philosophies like *karma* and life cycles. Studying either of these concepts in isolation can lead to distortion of its understanding. In this paper, I will try to explain this concept as expounded in Hindu mythology. Although Bharat or India today is secular and accepts all religions, its core culture still remains that of Hinduism or Vedic.

Understanding Hinduism

Anything, be it the man, the society or the civilization, is always limited by space and time. A person or a society or a civilization is only able to experience a particular amount of space and time and hence their outlook, perspective or worldview is also limited by that. The ideas, ideals, philosophies and culture that take shape in a particular society therefore establish and communicate that particular outlook of the world which we understand as mythology.

When talking about Hinduism we need to keep in mind that the world has changed dramatically over the past fifty years, especially with postmodernism questioning the very basis of western sciences and highlighting the strategic bias in the colonial discourse. Today the former colonies demand equal status for their beliefs. But global culture is not quite what we might expect it to be, as it is impossible to decolonize the colonized completely. Hence it may be easier to refer to

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biblical myth and analyse Christ as a sacred symbol, but it is difficult to analyse Hindu myths because people tend to look upon Hinduism through the lens of western understanding of the world. This happens because people are trying to understand Hindu religion in terms of another which is completely different from it.

Abrahamic religions believe in one all-powerful God, in one life and one way of living one's life, that is, by obeying the will of God, as described by a Prophet, in order to gain everlasting joy in heaven after death. The alternative is to face eternal suffering in hell. Hinduism on the contrary believes in several Gods/gods and Goddesses/goddesses, several lifetimes and several ways of living one's life. It believes that the cosmos is multi-layered and populated by several beings. The main difference between Hinduism and the Western culture is that Hindus believe that life, time and nature is cyclical while religions of the West see life as linear. There is one life, one death and one afterlife for eternity. There is either hell or heaven for the soul to go. Here angels are pure souls and demons are inherently evil. While in Hinduism there are several lifetimes separated by death. Here the soul suffers in *Naraka* or enjoys the pleasure of *Amaravati* only momentarily before being born again based on merits and demerits of one life. Here gods (*Devas*) can be punished and demons (*Asuras*) can be worshiped. There is no fixed heaven or hell but different *lokas* like *Amaravati*, *Patala*, *Yamalok*, *Vaikunth*, *Gyanlok*, *Gandharvlok*, *Yakshalok*, etc. There are no angels and demons but *Devas* and *Asuras* and other beings like *Gandharvas*, *Yakshas*, *Apsaras* and *Rakshasas*.

In order to understand Hindu mythology a paradigm shift is required. One must move away from western concepts of right and wrong, divine and diabolical, heaven and hell, genesis and apocalypse and fall and return. These concepts evolved to satisfy the needs of the Occident and presently form the bedrock of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In India a different worldview evolved over four thousand years with concepts responding to various socio-cultural phenomena to satisfy the needs of local population.

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Unfortunately, the colonial discourse has played a significant role in reconstructing the Hindu mythology for Hindus themselves. It has generated deep prejudices within people of the subcontinent. It transformed Vedic philosophies into ‘true faith’ while condemning tantric practices and folk beliefs into ‘black magic’. Hindu Renaissance led by Brahmans from elite class who received western education redefined Hinduism using biblical vocabulary which distorted the original traditional culture and continued to do so in present times. The battle of *Asuras* and *Devas* is viewed as battle of good and evil (never mind the fact that the scriptures describe the *Asuras* as half-brothers of the *Devas* and often as superior to them). The polygamous affections of *Devas* are rendered asexual. The nakedness of goddesses arouses shame and outrage. The worship of plants and animals are ridiculed. The cyclical theme of life is so buried that every new retelling or even translations of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is structured linearly, beginning with “once upon a time” and ending with a “happily ever after”.

In order to unravel the mysteries of Hindu mythology, coming to terms with these problems is essential. In order to truly understand the symbology and narratives of the Hindu culture, one must break free from the demands of colonial logic, biblical prejudice and approach the Hindu culture on its own terms and worldview as another system of ideas created by humans to help them come to terms with life.

Conflict of Dharma in Hindu Mythology

Hindu Texts Like the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* illustrates the way of the world and tells the readers how nothing is permanent and it is possible that what at the moment seems right may bear negative consequences in the future. For example, the story of Yayati as described in the *Adi Parvan* tells that Yayati was cursed by his father-in-law Shukra to become old and impotent because he had cheated his daughter Devyani and had children with Sarmishtha, her lady in waiting. After realizing that the curse would not only effect Yayati but also his daughter, he modified the curse by saying that

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Yayati can again become young if someone else agrees to take this curse upon himself on his behalf.

Yayati called his sons, Yadu and Puru and asked them to take his curse. Yadu refused saying it is against nature and dharma to reverse the march of time and make the son renounce the world when it is time for the father to do so. Puru accepted and suffered old age while his father enjoyed youth. Yayati pleased with Puru declared him his successor although he was the younger child and denied Yadu the throne despite being the elder son and cursed him that neither he nor his descendants would ever be kings. True to the curse Aryavrata was ruled by monarch kings from the House of Kuru, descendant of Puru while the Yadavs were not ruled by kings but by elders chosen by the people. Yadavs were never the king only king maker, or were they?

Looking logically at the bloodline the result is entirely different as the bloodline of Kuru technically ends with Bhishma. The next generation - that is Pandu and Dhritarashtra - didn't have Kuru blood as they were the sons of princesses of Kashi, Ambika and Ambalika and Ved Vyas who in turn was son of a Brahmin sage Parashar and a fisherwoman Satyawati. The last survivor who was installed to the throne by Yudhisthir after the war was Parikshit who was son of Abhimanyu and Uttara. Even before Parikshit, the kingdom was ruled by the Pandavas after the war and the High King was Yudhisthir who was a Kaunteya, son of Kunti who was actually a Yadav princess. Even Abhimanyu was the son of Arjun and Subhadra both of whom had Yadu blood.

It is interesting to note that Devavrata repeated what Puru did long ago. He sacrificed his youth so that his father could enjoy marital bliss. He also took a vow of celibacy and pledged to serve and uphold the lineage of the Pururavs and this very action later nullified everything he has dedicated his life to. He was incapable of taking a stand where he should have and took actions that were against *dharma*. His actions sowed the seeds for the Great War that happened later. The problem with

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following *dharma* is there is no fixed definition of righteousness, it is a subjective matter. For example, Devavrata thought it was right to kidnap the three princesses of Kashi for his brother, to force Gandhari into marrying his nephew Dhritarashtra, he valued his vow over life of Amba and over continuation of the Kuru bloodline. He chose to keep his vow over many wrongs that he witnessed without protesting which ultimately led to the war at Kurukshetra. By kidnapping Gandhari and mercilessly slaying the entire royal clan of Gandhar he ensured the destruction of the very lineage he promised to serve. Gandhari in rebellion blinded herself not only physically but also psychologically as she refused to see the mistakes of her son and instead of rebuking them encouraged them further down the wrong path. Bhishma's action also gave birth to the terrible vengeance in Shakuni when he killed his brothers and father. Bhishma kept Suvala, the king of Gandhar and all his sons as prisoners but only sent food enough for one person. Suvala decided only that person would eat the food who is the most intelligent and who would swear to live to destroy the Kuru clan. That person was Shakuni whose misguidance of his nephews and his political conspiracies made the Great War possible.

Moreover Duryodhana's fight over the throne was not unethical because he too had claim over the throne, perhaps more than Pandavas because of his bloodline. While he is the child of the ruling king Dhritarashtra, Pandavas were not related by blood to Pandu. Furthermore in the legendary battle of Kurukshetra, Kauravas had greater number of allies and army and were overpowered only by the cunning and plotting of Lord Krishna. According to *Udyoga Parvan* the combined number of warriors and soldiers in both armies was approximately four million, divided in *Akshouhini* which included 21,870 chariots and chariot riders, 21,870 elephants and riders, 65,6160 horses and riders and 109,350 foot soldiers in a ratio of 1:1:3:5. The questions to be asked is why four million people from all over the India were willing to kill or die in a simple war of succession or why greater proportion of the people chose to side with Kauravas if they were indeed wrong and evil and had no legitimate claim to support their succession to the throne.

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It is hard to say which side was following *dharma* because some characters are always granted the benefit of doubt. For example, if the Pandavas were really as saintly as are usually believed, did they not knowingly and willingly murder a *nishada* woman with her five sons in Varanavata in the house of lac to create confusion and to remain in hiding? Was Drona doing his *dharma* when he asked for the right thumb of Ekalavya as *gurudakshina*? It is true that he was keeping his vow he made to Arjuna to make him the best archer of his time but did he had a right to overlook the talent in a young *nishad* and treat him as collateral because of his caste? Yudhisthir is never condemned in his life for gambling away his kingdom and wife and was considered the only mortal worthy to reach *Swarga* and is considered to have fulfilled all his *dharma* and the fact that he was the son of Yama is always overlooked. The dicing game of *Sabha Parvan* also raises similar questions on *dharma* about ownership. Is the wife a property of her husband? Can a person be considered property of another person? Can a person who is himself the property of another still have ownership of his brothers and wife? And most importantly does any vow or technical dilemma over a text (*Dharmashastras*) justify loss of life or the molestation of a woman?

Another example of conflict of *dharma* is presented in *Shanti Parvan* of *Mahabharata* where Yudhishtir was told by Bhishma a tale about Vishwamitra. Once there was a terrible drought and there was no food in sight. The sage Vishwamitra who was very hungry and was on the verge of starvation ate flesh of a dog he had stolen from a *Chandala*. The *Dharmashastras* strictly forbade a *Bhramin* to touch or receive anything as alms from a *Chandala*, secondly it forbade a *Bhramin* to steal, third it forbade a *Bhramin* to consume flesh let alone that of a dog and that which is already half consumed by another man. But when asked Vishwamitra justified himself by saying “This body in which my soul resides is a friend of mine. It is very dear to me and is worthy of the highest reverence. It is from the desire of sustaining the body that I wish to take this dog's haunch. One should, when one is dying, preserve one's life by any means in one's power without judging anything else. Afterwards, when competent, one should seek the acquisition of merit. That by which

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life may be preserved should certainly be accomplished without scruple. Life is better than death. It is only by living one may acquire virtue. By committing this sinful act today I will save my life which is very sacred. Having saved my life, I shall afterwards practice virtue and cleanse my soul. It is a sin to consume unclean food but when one's life is in danger there is no sin in doing so. One cannot claim to know what constitutes righteousness one can only do what is beneficial and do not, from temptation, do what is sinful.”

Understanding Karma

Verse 47 of Chapter 2 of Srimad Bhagavad Gita states -

*Karmannivadhikaraste ma faleshu kadachana
Ma Karmaphalaheturbhurma Te Sangostvakarmani*

This translates to - You have the right to work only but never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction.

Usually Karma today is simply understood as action and invokes a feeling of ‘tit for tat’. But In Hindu mythology it has two parts *Karmabija* and *Karmafala*. And these two concepts are to be studied with the notions of birth cycles and *paap-punya*. Hindu mythology believes that a soul goes through cycles of births and deaths and their actions or *karmabija* in one lifetime results in the *karmafala* or *paap-punya* that is then carried over to their next birth. This is why some people seem to enjoy good fortune even if they are not worth it and misfortune befalls good people.

This is explained in the story of Ganga who after marrying Shantanu drowned seven of her sons who were the seven Vasus cursed by Vashistha for stealing a cow *kaamdhenu*. Was Ganga doing *adharma* by killing the infants or was she just a cog in a bigger mechanism. She was freeing the Vasus from the curse of having to live a mortal life but Dyu the Vasu who actually committed the act of stealing had to live a long sorrowful life as Bhishma. Stories from Hindu Mythology over and over again

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reinforce that concepts of *Karma*, *Dharma*, *Paap*, *Punya* and Life Cycles are all intertwined together and must not be studied in isolation.

Understanding Vishnu and Lakshmi, Yugas and Avatars

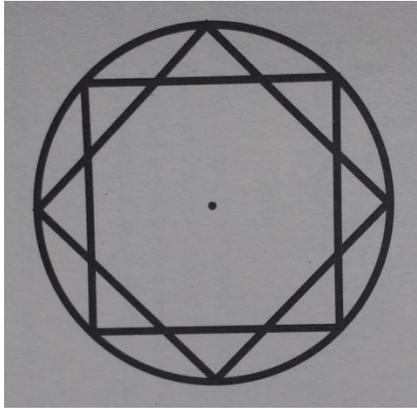
In Order to understand *Dharma* further we need to understand the concept of holy trinity of Hinduism where Brahma and Saraswati are the creator and represents nature, Vishnu and Lakshmi are the preservers and represents the civilisation or society and Shiva and Shakti are the destroyers and represents the soul. Brahma and Saraswati are represented in arts or symbols with a circle because a circle is the most spontaneous of natural shapes taken by stars, planets, horizons and bubbles. It represents the Hindu *Brahmand* or universe because Hindus see the world as being timeless, boundless, infinite and cyclical.

Amongst the Trinity only Shiva has a third eye in the centre of this forehead indicating unprejudiced view of the world or *darshan*. *Darshan* means to see the world as it is without any prejudices inflicted upon mind through culture. Shiva is a God who is not interested in worldly truths that are constantly changing and are bound to time, space and opinions of people. He seeks *Sat*, the permanent, unconditional and absolute truth. He shuts his eyes to the world, not letting memories, desires, ideas and ego crumple his consciousness. Shiva and Shakti are presented in the art as a point. A point that is dimensionless and most elemental of all the geometric forms. Without a point no circle or square can be drawn. This dot represents the soul or *atma*, the formless divine. Just as existence of a circle requires existence of a dot, the existence of world requires the existence of the soul.

Vishnu and Laxmi are presented in the arts as a square because a square with its sharp and equally measured edges is the most artificial of shapes which represents culture or civilization. The sharp edges also represent the value of judgment which is missing in nature. Different cultures have different values but all cultures, however different depends on nature for their survival, therefore the square of culture is always anchored to the rim of the circle at its corner. What lies within the square is

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socially appropriate while what lies out is inapt. Outside, sex and violence are untamed, inside the square however it is controlled by the code of *dharmā*.



Unlike Brahma whose four heads faces four different directions to appreciate the world in its totality, from every point of view, Vishnu focuses just on maintaining order in the culture. Vishnu is visualized as a warrior god, who holds in his hands a *shankh* (conch shell) announcing his presence to the world, *Sudarshan Chakra* (discus) representing the rhythm of life, *Kaumodki Gada* (mace) to punish the wrong doers and a lotus to reward the follower of *dharmā*. He rests upon the coils of serpent Sheshnaga or Vasuki which represents a stable earth that regenerate itself with the seasons and tides at regular interval or he rides Gaduda into battle to set things right which represents the sweeping wind of change.

Vishnu is the preserver, the God who organizes the world in a manner where all the changes of *Brahmanda* become manageable and predictable. He organizes the world in a rhythm and with rhythm comes waves and troughs. The Goddess for Vishnu has two forms Laxmi and Alaxmi. Laxmi is the desirable wave of nature that is fertile and auspicious like day, the high tide, the waxing moon, the spring, the rains and the harvests. Alaxmi is the undesirable trough of the nature that is barren and inauspicious like night, the low tide, the waning moon, the hot and dry summers and bitter-cold winters. Society, which Vishnu tends to, comes with rules and regulations, roles and responsibility and standards that create hierarchy. Laxmi is at the top of the hierarchy who society admires and below is Alaxmi who society shuns.

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In order to uphold law and order in this ever changing world Vishnu takes *avtaars* and descend in the earth in different times. The *Bhagavat Purana* visualizes the world as a cow (*go*) and Vishnu as its protector (*Govind*). *Prithvi*, when over exerted by humans, comes to Vishnu to save her who takes *avtaar* and set things right. The ten *avtaars* or incarnations of Vishnu are Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (half lion and half man), Vamana (dwarf), Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki (horse rider). As mentioned in The *Bhagavat Puaran* these *avtaars* are the upholders of *dharma*.

Vishnu as God is *Bhagwan* - that is *Bhag* (portion) and *Waan* (lord). Because humans are limited by space and time they are only able to experience a part (bhag) or portion of it. And God who is able to experience the infiniteness of space and time is known as *bhagwaan* or 'lord of all portions'. *Bhagwaan* is infinite and intangible and their tangible and finite forms bound by the laws of nature are known as *avtaar*.

According to Hinduism, time is cyclical and is known as *Kalpa*. A *Kalpa* is divided in to four *yugas* – *Ktita*, *Treta*, *Dwapar* and *Kali*. A *Kalpa* is preceded by the creation and followed by *pralay*. In every *yuga* the definition of right and wrong changes and with that changes the square of Vishnu and Laksmi and the egdes of the previous square that falls outside the new square are then considered wrong by the new society.

The *Yuga* or epoch when the *avtaar* descends on earth is of great importance and so are the principles of that time. For example Rama is *Maryada Purushottam* while Krishna is *Leela Purushottam*. Both are incarnations of Vishnu born in different epoch or *yuga*. Rama is born in *Treta yuga* while Krishna in *Dwapar yuga* and therefore the means or principles to maintain *Dharma* differed. Krishna encouraged people to break the traditions while Rama upholds them. The *avtaars* of Vishnu are different in form because demands of the world are different. The idea of different avatars conveys that rules and regulations that maintain order are not static. As man's understandings of the world changes so do the concept of order. Rules

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therefore have to constantly adapt themselves and new ideas must be accepted and respected. Vishnu's *avtaars* not only re-establish order but also redefine them.

It is explained through the example of Shambuka who was beheaded by Rama because he was a *shudra* who committed the crime of doing *tappasya*. This was the *Treta yuga* where roles within the caste system were fixed and anyone who tried to break free of the same was killed and these killings were accepted as normal and morally ethical. The scenario in *Dwapar yuga* was somewhat different although Karna and Ekalavya were never praised for their effort to break free of the caste they were born into, the society did not sanction their outright killings either. It presents a society that was more corrupt but also more accepting of fluidity in the traditional Brahmanical society. While the *Avatar* of Vishnu prevented any fluidity in *Treta yuga* as Rama, his next *avatar* Krishna actually helped and plotted to change orthodox outlook in the next *yuga*.

The final chapter of the *Ramayana* draws attention to the difference between *dharma* and *niti* and *riti*. *Niti* means law and *riti* means tradition. Laws and traditions are created in full earnestness to help the helpless. Sometimes they can end up being unfair and cruel. When law and tradition fail to uphold the principle of *dharma*, they need to be abandoned or changed.

Pattanaik (2011) 7 *Secrets of Vishnu* (page 155)

As Vishnu represents the civilization and culture, the narratives associated with Vishnu or his *avtaars* constantly draws attention to the difference between culture and nature, between *nyaya* and *matsya-nayaya*, laws of jungle and laws of culture. For example the symbol of *Lakshman rekha* represents the divide between nature and culture. Within the line applies the rule of culture, outside applies the rule of jungle, inside Sita is Ram's wife, outside she is a woman for taking. Everything inside the square is acceptable while everything outside is undesirable. Inside the square are the *Manavas* descendants of Manu who upholds *dharma*, outside resides *Rakshasas* who follow *matsya-nayaya* or survival of the fittest. Inside the square the

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Goddess is Laxmi and Gauri, outside she is Alaxmi and Kali. This square of Vishnu and Laxmi distinguish cultural codes from natural laws which we call *dharma*.

The Final Thought

If we consider *dharma* to be righteousness, then we place ourselves in a situation where people as long as they can justify themselves are following *dharma*, like Bhishma did when he had kidnapped Gandhari, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika and did nothing when Draupadi was being molested. So did Drona when he asked for Ekalavya's thumb because he was honoring his promise to Arjuna. And so did Duryodhana because he was able to quote from the scriptures that wife of his servant is his property. There is however a second definition of *dharma* as offered by Lord Krishna in chapter 4 of *Bhagavad Gita*.

Verse 21 of Chapter 4 of Srimad Bhagavad Gita states-

Nirāśhīr yata-chittātmā tyakta-sarva-parigrahaḥ

Shārīram kevalam karma kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣham

This translates to -

Free from expectations, without attachment, controlled in mind and senses, having discarded all ownership and performing action only through the body, he does not attain the bondage of sin.

It means that when humans behave as animals do, despite the human ability to outgrow animal nature, it is *adharmā*.

Dharma is more about empathy than ethics, about intent rather than outcome. I follow *dharma* when I am concerned about your material, emotional or intellectual hunger. I follow *adharmā* when I focus on my hunger at the cost of yours.

Pattanaik (2015) *My Gita* (page 98)

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