



## Dharma (in Indian Philosophy)

The word *dharma* (धर्म) is derived from the root *dhṛ*, to support, to uphold, to establish. *Dharma* is thus that which upholds as well as that which is being upheld. *Dharma* manifests itself socially through the performance of virtuous duties that interpret and manifest the cosmic order on earth. Focusing upon the analogous relationship between cosmic and social *dharma*, and thus on a transcendent truth that justifies a normative social order, indologist Wilhelm Halbfass defines *dharma* as follows:

“*Dharma* itself is that upholding which is incumbent on qualified men; it is also the condition under which upholding is possible. It protects its protectors. Only the original cosmogonic *dharman* is “upholding” and “establishing” per se, i.e., upholding of the world itself and establishment of order and tradition. All subsequent human *dharma* is perpetuation and renewal of the primeval upholding, is upholding of the original *dharma*, i.e., of those primordial cosmic and social divisions and polarizations which are the very condition of ritual and ethics.” (Halbfass, 1990: 318)

Dharmic duty for the twice-born social classes is two-fold: *sādhāraṇa dharma*, which is common to everyone and encompasses the common practice of virtues like self-control, compassion, truthfulness, etc. and *varṇāśrama dharma*, which is specific to each of the classes and stages of life, and changes depending upon one’s birth and age.<sup>1</sup> *Varṇāśrama dharma* is thus context specific. In his *Introduction to Hinduism*, Gavin Flood clarifies the contextual nature of *dharma* when he states:

“the religious obligations of men differ at different ages and vary according to caste (*jati*), family (*kula*), and country (*desha*) ... what is correct action for a warrior would be incorrect for a Brahman, what is correct for a man may be incorrect for a woman, and so on. Manu says: ‘one’s own duty, without any good qualities, is better than someone else’s duty well-done.’” (Flood: 58)

### Sources of *Dharma* in Aryan Culture:

The social hierarchy of *varṇāśrama dharma* regulates both ritual and ethical behavior, at both the individual and the social levels, and finds its justification, source and meaning in the primary revelation (*śruti*), the texts of cosmic, non-human origin (as defined in the Vedas, Samhitas, and Brāhmaṇas<sup>2</sup>) and throughout the secondary literature (*smṛti*), human authored commentaries (*dharma* is mentioned in the Sutras and Śāstras as well as the Mahābhārata epic<sup>3</sup> and later in the six philosophical *darśanas*<sup>4</sup>). Ritually reenacting the cosmic “upholding,” *dharma* enacts the human divisions that order the social world by specifying the identities of individuals and groups in order to ensure that social norms are established and harmony achieved. Thus it is *dharma* that separates the Aryan from the *mleccha* (barbarian), and *dharma* that distinguishes the four social classes with the Brahman priests, the guardians of

the Vedas and the Sanskrit language, at the top. Thus, as Halbfass explains, “an ancient cosmogonic term becomes a vehicle of traditionalism and ethnocentrism” (Halbfass, 1990: 332). The analogy between cosmic and social *dharma* reinforces the social and religious status quo of the *varṇāśramadharmā* in order to transmit the hierarchies of the Aryan tradition continuously over time. Thus *dharma* is the unifying key to Aryan identity, dictating the norms of conduct and the sacrificial acts that maintain the cosmic and social order and legitimize the privilege of the Brahman class as guardians of the *dharma*.

The Function, or teleological goal of *dharma* within Aryan culture is thus threefold:

1. *Dharma* isolates Aryan social identity, by differentiating the Aryan from the *mleccha* and reinforcing an ethnocentric superiority. This leads Halbfass to understand the history of *dharma* as “the history of Hindu xenology” (Halbfass, 1990: 320).
2. *Dharma* is a Means of maintaining Aryan power, by justifying the social order as analogous with the cosmic order and its upholding of the truth as revealed in the Vedas.
3. *Dharma* is the principle means of Hindu identification and unification. Classical Hinduism evolves around the concept of *dharma*. To cite from A.L. Basham, “*Dharma* is the common thread running through Hinduism” (A.L. Basham, *The Rise of Classical Hinduism*: 102).

### **Translation:**

Though the term is considered by many to be untranslatable, the translations of the term that are most often repeated in dictionaries and scholarly texts are those of “religion” (Monier-Williams dictionary), “norm, “duty,” “justice,” “custom,” “religious ordinances or rites” (Kane), “religion,” “law” (Grassmann, Bergaigne, Ballanfat), “virtue,” “ethics,” “religious merit,” “principle,” “right,” “the performance of vedic ritual” (Staal) and “obligations appropriate to one’s family and social group” (Flood). No single monograph or lexical survey has yet been published tracing the meaning of the term *dharma*.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the many different usages and connotations of the word, *dharma* is the Sanskrit word chosen by Western scholars to translate the term “religion.” The Monier-Williams dictionary thus lists *dharma* as the first translation of religion, with *iśvarabhakti* or devotion to God, listed as the second translation. Some scholars prefer to use other translations of the term to emphasize the sense of duty the term carries<sup>6</sup> and to avoid the Christian understandings of religiosity that are often faith-based (Hinduism has its own *bhakti* or devotion traditions, but they are non-exclusionary) and that were exported to other cultures as part of Western colonialism and Christian hegemony. The meaning of religion in the singular is Eurocentric and has tended to universalize itself only at the cost of sacrificing cultural phenomena that do not overlap with Catholic and Protestant presuppositions, phenomena that were ignored, denigrated or simply invisible to Western scholars.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, in the modern period, as part of the movement for the unification of Indian traditions, and in reaction to missionary and colonial attempts to interpret *dharma* along Christian lines, *dharma* was interpreted by Neo-Hindus as a universal principle of unity, over and beyond specific religions, and hence as a hope for the future beyond the sectarian boundaries of dogmatic religions.<sup>8</sup> Indian intellectuals resorted to the traditional concept of *dharma* in order to convey their understanding of religion as an eternal and universal truth (see Nakamura). Thus *dharma* came to be interpreted not only as “law” or “custom” but also as something universal to humanity and beyond sectarian and religious differences. As Hajime Nakamura explains:

“Generally speaking, among Asians there prevails a strong antipathy to the Western use of the ‘ism’ to represent individual religions, suggesting, in other words, that Buddhism is not an ‘ism’ or Hinduism is not an ‘ism’. Both are just aspects of *dharma*.” (Nakamura, 147-148)

The translation of *dharma* as religion thus enters into a Hindu re-appropriation of its own tradition in light of colonialism and western scholarship, and is thus an assertion of a modern Hindu identity that seeks in the concept of *dharma* a continuous tradition that can be traced all the way back to the Vedas. *Dharma* is the official term for religion in the Indian constitution and in the constitutional definition of the Indian Republic as a “secular state” (*dharmanirapekṣa rājya*) (Halbfass 1990: 310). Thus Hinduism is called *Hindu-dharma*, Christianity is called *Khṛṣṭa-dharma*, Buddhism is called *Bauddha-dharma*, and philosophy of religion is called *dharma-darśana*, to name just these.

### **Aryan Ideology:**

It is as part of this Hindu re-appropriation and unification that we find *dharma* interpreted as the central ideological concept of the *varṇāśrama*, or ethical/legal system of Vedic obligation underpinning the class system and the stages of life. Neo-Hindu scholars justify this interpretation by tracing the term *dharma* back to the start of Aryan civilization in India, as attested in the eternal Vedas and the secondary revelation. But there is no continuous single meaning in the ancient texts, but rather a multiplicity of overlapping meanings and usages, with different emphases developing at different periods. For this reason, understanding the meaning of *dharma* in India outside of these historical colonial and neo-Hindu constructions is quite difficult. Thus G. J. Larson writes: “the term *dharma* seems to be one impossible to reduce even to a few basic definitions. It is ubiquitous throughout the texts of the Indian tradition, ancient and modern, and has been used in a bewildering variety of ways” (Halbfass, 1990: 312). It is for this reason that scholar Richard King has attacked Halbfass for “appealing to the universality of the concept of *dharma* in pre-modern Hindu thought” (King: 15). He writes:

“To appeal to the Indian concept of *dharma* as unifying the diversity of Hindu religious traditions is moot, since *dharma* is not a principle that is amenable to a single, universal interpretation, being in fact appropriated in diverse ways by a variety of Indian traditions (all of which tended to define the concept in terms of their own group-dynamic and identity). The appeal to *dharma* therefore is highly questionable in the same sense that an appeal to the

notion of the Covenant would be in establishing that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were actually sectarian offshoots of a single religious tradition.” (King: 109-110)

King, and other scholars before him,<sup>9</sup> point out that terms like *dharma* are important normative paradigms for contemporary Hindu self-identity, though actually belonging to the high culture of the Brahmins, and thus believed in only by a minority. Calling for postcolonial scholarship that might question the hegemony of Aryan ideology, and bring to light the heterogeneity of Indian cultures, King claims that such scholarship would allow “for the possibility of subaltern responses to dominant ideological constructs and the cultural and political elitism that they tend to support” (King: 111).

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### Further Reading:

- Ballanfat, Mark, *Le vocabulaire des philosophies de l'Inde*, 2003, Paris: Ellipses.
- Flood, Gavin, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 1996, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grimes, John, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 112.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, 1990, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. Chapters 17 and 18.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).
- Monier-Williams Sanskrit English Dictionary. <http://sanskrit.inria.fr/MW/128.html>
- Nakamura, Hajime, “The Meaning of the Terms ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Religion’ in Various Traditions,” in Larson, Gerald James and Deutsch, Eliot (eds.), *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, 1989, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, pp. 137-151.
- Olivelle, Patrick (ed.) *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural, and Religious History* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The four classes are Brahman (priests), Kṣatriyā (kings and warriors), Vaiśya (merchants, farmers, craftsmen...) and Śūdra (in the service of the other three). The four stages of life for the Brahman class are student, householder, hermit, and wandering ascetic.

<sup>2</sup> References to *dharma* in Śruti literature (primary revelation, revealed to the ṛṣi, or sages):

a) The Vedas: There are approximately sixty references to *dharma* in the Vedas (Halbfass, 1990: 314). In the Ṛgveda, *dharman* usually refers to the ritual backdrop, religious ordinances, rites or established order, custom or law. Ritual practice thus “upholds” the cosmic order, and separates heaven from earth (Ṛgveda VI: 70-1). In its plural (especially *dharmāṇ prathamāni*) and in the Atharvaveda, where *dharman* becomes *dharma*, the term is transformed from active ‘Upholding’ to the passive ‘upheld’, the stable norm, or established order (*ṛta*, impersonal law).

b) The Upaniṣads: In the Upaniṣads *dharma* is often described as something subtle and difficult to understand: “Truly it is not easily known. This dharma is subtle” (Katha Upaniṣad). In the Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad *dharma* indicates a connection with “lawfulness.”

c) Samhitās: In these texts, *dharma* is described as a system of activity that guides the world, the ritualistic order of Vedic sacrifice.

d) Brāhmaṇas: In these texts, *dharma* becomes closely aligned with *karman* (action responsible for the cycle of reincarnation). Thus Gonda writes that “*Dharma*, *Karman* and *Samśāra* constitute one complex, ideological system” (Gonda I: 292). In the Śatapath Brāhmaṇa (XIV, 7, 3, 15) *dharma* is described as “essential quality” or essential attribute/characteristic.

e) Aranyakas: In the Taittiriya Aranyaka (X, 79) *dharma* is given as partaking in a list of twelve ordering factors or principles of human behavior.

<sup>3</sup> References to *Dharma* in the Smṛti literature (secondary revelation, human authored):

a) Sutras: The Kalpa, Śrauta and Gṛhya Sūtras are concerned with ritual and law (8<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE). They represent ritual directives for the performance of public vedic ritual. It is in the Dharma

Sutras that the moral and social rules, the *varṇāśramadharmā* is developed. One's dharma depends upon one's class (*varṇa*) and one's stage of life (*āśrama*).

b) Dharma Śāstras: The Dharma Śāstras give more explicit directives, particularly in regards to the role of the king. Here dharmic injunction merges into jurisprudence. The Manu Smṛti (The Laws of Manu) is the most important document tracing this transference of *dharma* into a legal code linked to the monarchy. "The ideology of dharma was articulated at the level of the court, embodied in the figure of the king, and manifested in the social world in rules of interpersonal interaction and ritual injunction" (Flood: 52).

c) Arthaśāstra: It is in this text (see particularly 1.3.13) that *sādhāraṇadharmā* ("pertaining to everyone") emerges in addition to *svadharmā* ("pertaining to oneself").

d) The Mahabharata Epic: *Dharman* is used in terms of holding apart different spheres "the creatures are kept apart, i.e., upheld in their respective identities, by *dharma* (*dharmena vidhṛtah prajah*)."  
*Ahiṃsā* (non-harm) is the central meaning of dharma in this epic, since *ahiṃsā* "upholds" and "preserves" each thing in its rightful place.

<sup>4</sup> The *Darśanas*: Philosophical Schools (what follows is based on Grimes, 1996: 112-14):

1. Mīmāṃsā: *Dharma* is understood to be a supreme value that is an end in itself as opposed to an *upaya*, or instrumental goal to reach liberation; what is enjoined in the Veda; religious duty, the performance thereof bringing merit and its neglect bringing demerit.

2. Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika: *dharma* is a specific quality (*viśeṣa guṇa*) that belongs to the self.

3. Sāṅkhya-yoga: *dharma* is a mode of the intellect (*buddhi*). It is due to confusion that one may believe that *dharma* belongs to the empirical sphere because at the level of Reality merit and demerit do not touch the trans-empirical individual soul.

4. Vedānta: In Vedānta, *dharma* is attributive consciousness, knowledge as the attribute of God and individuals (*dharma bhūta jñāna*). In Advaita Vedānta *dharma* is true only at the highest level of appearance, and is false once this level has been sublated (*badha*) by absolute truth.

Contesting the meaning of *dharma* as embodied in the classic Hindu social hierarchy is also central to understanding the meaning of the heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism.

5. Buddhism: In the Buddhist tradition, *Dharma* means cosmic order; the Void, the Absolute, the Reality of all beings and appearances, for example in *dharma dhātu*, which means the core of Reality (suchness, or thusness of existence); the teachings of the Buddha, from *dharma cakṛa pravartana* "setting into motion the wheel of dharma," the first of Buddha's sermons after awakening, and by analogy all of Buddha's teaching; natural law, for instance with *dharma kāya* which means the "sheath of the law" and *dharma megha* which means "cloud of the law"; norms of conduct; things or facts; ideas, and factors of existence; scriptural texts; quality; cause; primary substances.

6. Jainism: medium of motion that pervades the entire universe.

7. Carvaka: materialism. In the carvaka school, knowledge can be derived exclusively from sense perception, so the authority of the Vedas and other textual sources is contested, and the revealed understanding of *dharma* as well.

<sup>5</sup> The most complete treatment remains that of Wilhelm Halbfass in chapters 17-18 of his book *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*. The volume edited by Patrick Olivelle, *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2009) also has excellent chapters tracing the meaning of *dharma* in different texts and traditions.

<sup>6</sup> In *Le vocabulaire des philosophies de l'Inde*, Mark Ballanfat, for instance, lists *dharma* as the translation of the word "law," and defines the term as including "norm" "duty" and "religion":

"In the socio-juridical field, *dharma* signifies the norm according to which each social class must conform. In the moral context the word refers to the duty that each individual must perform, and the merit that results for the agent. Religion gives to *dharma* a cosmic dimension by identifying it with the sacred order of the world. Between the law and the norm, *dharma* (literally "the action of establishing, from whence what is established, ordered, instituted") circumscribes the vast domain of the law and of respect owed to it, in the most diverse of situations" (59).

<sup>7</sup> For the history of this term as it relates to the Christian conquest of the world from the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries the reader can consult J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Taylor, Mark (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, to cite only the most famous exponents, Radhakrishnan, S.V. Ketkar, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Ganga Prasad, Vivekananda, Bhagavan Das, Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Aurobindo, Rammohan Roy, B.G. Tilak, M.K. Gandhi, etc...

<sup>9</sup> Readers can consult Inden, R. *Imagining India* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) and “Orientalist Constructions of India” in *Modern Asian Studies* 20.3, 1986, pp. 401-446; Sontheimer, Günter D., and Kulke, Hermann (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991); Guha, Ranajit, “On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India” in *Subaltern Studies 1*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988) and “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency” in *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).