

Dharma—the Heart of Hindu Ethics.

BY M. S. ŚRĪNIVĀSA ŚARMĀ, M. A.

DHARMA—A SOCIAL NECESSITY

Dharma is a unique term peculiar to Hindu thought. It is a comprehensive concept, which comprises all those forms of human activity which are indispensable for the growth and maintenance of moral and spiritual life. It signifies not only right *living* but also right *being*. It is the manifestation of the true personality in practical conduct. Etymologically it stands for that which supports and maintains the social organization and the whole complex system of social values. 'धर्मं सर्वं प्रतिष्ठितम्'. Everything in the universe is rooted in *Dharma*. It is that which integrates the members of the society together into a functional unity—'धर्णाद् धर्मं इत्याहुर्धर्मो धारयते प्रजाः'. Thus *Dharma*, which 'holds' society together in integrated unity, resides in the individual but arises in society, and works for social solidarity. *Dharma* is the highest categorical imperative of duty, which is the basic principle of individual and social existence. It is the regulative guide to conduct, and leads ultimately to the achievement of the eternal and spiritual End of man. *Dharma* is, therefore, our social attitude towards the human environment; the interpersonal relation,

whether it is communal or national, is always essentially a dharmic relation, and the consciousness of the rights and duties that are indispensable for the harmonious, creative, social life is ultimately based on the consciousness of moral obligation. As personal morality is a necessary condition of social solidarity, so is the community essential for the perfecting of the individual. We cannot isolate ourselves from society and perfect ourselves *in vacuo*.

LOKASANGRAHA

The supreme ideal of Hindu Ethics is "Lokasangraha", the well-being and solidarity of the world; and this is brought about by each individual performing his *Dharma*. It is not right to say that the Hindu sages cared only for their *personal* salvation. The *Gītā* tells us that the Ṛṣis whose sins have been destroyed and whose doubts have been dispelled, perfectly controlling themselves and intent upon the welfare of all beings, obtain eternal peace—

लभन्ते ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमषयः क्षीणकल्मषाः ।
छिन्नद्वैधा यतात्मानः सर्वभूतहिते रताः ॥

Again, in the familiar stanza which contains the quintessence of all ethical treatises, we are given in a nutshell the central principle of all moral and

* धृतिः क्षमा दमोऽस्तेयं शौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः । धीर्विद्या सत्यमक्रोधो दशकं धर्मलक्षणम् ॥

† A detailed account of Sanatana Dharma in Bengali.

be had in the writer's book 'Sanatana Dharma'

religious life. Moral excellence consists in doing good to others, and sin in causing injury—

श्लोकाधेन प्रवक्ष्यामि यदुक्तं ग्रन्थकोटिभिः ।
परोपकारः पुण्याय पापाय परपीडनम् ॥

Philanthropy and social service, therefore, constitute the life of morality among the Hindus. The welfare of the society and its solidarity and integrity are achieved by *Dharma*, which in the ethical code of India connotes the supreme Duty of man.

Philosophy with the Hindus is not simply a *view* of life, it is also a *way* of life; not simply *Tattva-Darśana*, but also *Dharma-Sādhana*. The realization of the true self (*Mokṣa*) is the supreme problem of life. Therefore, it has come to occupy the core of all philosophical and religious quests. The metaphysical task and the ethical discipline, to the Hindus, are actuated by the same motive, and have the same objective in view. In the West it is usual to separate them, and construct philosophical systems entirely divorced from ethical considerations, and treat ethical questions independently of metaphysical implications. Such a dichotomous division is thoroughly foreign to the Hindu mind. Logical principles and ethical values are interdependent and complementary. In Hindu thought Philosophy and Ethics are necessarily intertwined, and together work for the spiritual salvation of the soul.

DHARMA—DYNAMIC

Moral life is essentially dynamic. Duty does not consist in solitary and sporadic acts of goodness; it is continuous and incessant *striving* after the highest ideal. There are no holidays in moral life! Eternal vigilance and ceaseless activity characterize the essence of a dharmic life. The *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* declares that "a man should spend his life-span of a hundred years entirely in the ceaseless performance of right actions."—

‘कुर्वन्नेवेह कर्माणि जिजीविषेच्छतं समाः ।’

Śrī Kṛṣṇa informs us that duty is concomitant with life. "Our forefathers ever seeking liberation performed action; therefore do thou also perform action."

एवं ज्ञात्वा कृतं कर्म पूर्वैरपि सुसुखिभिः ।
कुरु कर्मैव तस्मात्त्वं पूर्वैः पूर्वतरं कृतम् ॥

In the matter of moral life there is no vicariousness. Each has to work out his own salvation. Self-Realization is a personal achievement. The *Gitā* gives us the secret and asks us to raise the self by the self, and not to let it become depressed—

‘उद्धरदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् ।’

The raising of the self by the self is by a strenuous process of effortful striving, ceaseless practice of *Dharma*, and intense purification of the self by the joyful discharge of duties in the right spirit. In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhiṣma points out that Heaven's help comes only to those who have exerted and put forth real and strenuous effort; where there is not this effortful striving, God's help and successful fruition are completely absent—

कृतः पुरुषकारस्तु दैवमेवानुवर्तते ।
न दैवमकृते किञ्चित् कस्यचिद्दातुमर्हति ॥

Again, *Dharma* or Duty is essentially action taken in the line of the greatest resistance; it always emerges out of a conflict between the feeling of "ought" and the object of desire; that is, it is conscious \ constraint of desire. The *Kāthopaniṣad* brings out beautifully the inner struggle in moral consciousness and points out that duty and desire (pleasure) are always in conflict, and that it is only in such a conflict that we come upon the deepest of all moral values. "There are two different paths, the good and the pleasant. It is well for him who follows the path of the good, because he is ultimately rewarded by the fulfilment of his aim. But he who chooses the pleasant misses the true

aim of life. It is the wise man who chooses the path of the good, while the fool elects the pleasant, through avarice and attachment.'"

अन्यच्छ्रेयोऽन्यदुतैव प्रेयस्ते उभे नानार्थे पुरुषः सिनीतः ।
तयोः श्रेय आददानस्य साधुर्भवति हीयतेऽर्थाच्च उ प्रेयो वृणीते ॥
श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च मनुष्यमेतस्तौ संपरीत्य विविनक्ति धीरः ।
श्रेयो हि धीरोऽभिप्रेयसो वृणीते प्रेयो मन्त्रो योगक्षेमाद् वृणीते ॥

Is it not a fact that in every stage of spiritual development the *ascetic* element is prominent? Life to us is an opportunity for spiritual adventure; and the excellences of life are the excellences of conquest rather of meek submission to passing desires and fleeting pleasures.

VARṆA-ĀŚRAMA-DHARMA

Though *Dharma* is the concrete and creative expression of a well-developed moral self, yet it is relative to the position and standing which the individual holds in society. The ancient Ṛṣis have given a practical shape to the principle of dynamic relativity in the ideal of Varṇa-Āśrama-Dharma. This ideal aims at the freedom and perfection of each individual, and coordinates and integrates the divisions in human society through the distribution of functions among them by abolishing all cut-throat competition, and by confining each individual to his own *Swadharmā*. It recognizes the needs and instincts of human nature, and frames regulations and institutions necessary to help individuals and society to fulfil those needs, and thus enables everyone to gain the ultimate purpose of human existence as laid down by the Vedas. The various duties designed for the different stages and ranks of life are distinct steps in the progressive realization of the Sādhanas of *Nivṛtti* and *Vairāgya*. The beauty and charm of this ideal is that everywhere emphasis is laid wholly on the discharge of duty and the development of the spirit of service and sacrifice

and that nowhere is to be found any tendency towards arrogant assumption of private rights and selfish privileges.

Dharma not only reckons with one's stage in life and station in society; it also includes the Sādhāraṇa Dharmas which have a universal scope and objective validity. They are, according to Manu, the following: Steadfastness, Forgiveness, Application, Non-appropriation, Purity, Control of sense-organs, Wisdom, Learning, Veracity, Restraint of Anger. There are also other classifications of duties such as *Nitya*, *Naimittika*, *Prāyaścitta*, *Kāmya*, *Niṣiddha*, etc., which have been planned to suit the differences in heredity, social position, psychological equipment, age, health and environmental factors. All these practical guides to daily conduct discipline the individual in the due performance of the necessary duties, which are not only indispensable for his existence but which bring about the harmonious working of the community of which he is a member.

ĀCHĀRA

The criterion which settles for us what our *specific* duties are is to be found in the Āchāras which embody the codifications of Law-givers and the actual experiences and rational convictions of countless generations of man. Manu says that the four essential characteristics of *Dharma* are: Conformity to Holy Scriptures, Codes of laws, conduct of respectable persons (*sadāchāra*) and one's rational conviction:—

श्रुतिः स्मृतिः सदाचारः स्वस्य च प्रियमात्मनः ।
एतच्चतुर्विधं प्राहुः साक्षाद् धर्मस्य लक्षणम् ॥

The Hindu thinkers are convinced that we have to depend entirely on the Holy Scriptures for establishing *Dharma* and *Brahma*. Therefore the *Gītā* affirms that the scriptures should be our authority in determining what ought to be done and what ought not, and that we ought to work in the world according to the ordinances of the Śāstras—

तस्माच्छास्त्रं प्रमाणं ते कार्याकार्यव्यवस्थितौ ।
ज्ञात्वा शास्त्रविधानोक्तं कर्म कर्तुमिहार्हसि ॥

Our ancient thinkers were not ignorant of the essentially mobile and progressive nature of society. They knew that change was the primal law of life; but they were wise enough to point out that the path of progress must be evolutionary. The *Āchāra* is not a static thing; it develops by the constant effort of the best members (शिष्ट) of the community to reach a higher standard of life than that in which they find themselves. In every society we have a set of people who are the best exponents of the culture and ideals of that community. They have no vested interests; their main concern is the welfare of society. They are not only the custodians of achieved culture, but the ready sponsors to the forward march of the community in every direction; and it is to them that its individual members must look for light and guidance to effect changes in moral and social matters. They are called the *Āptas*, whose statements bear the stamp of *Pramāṇa*. They are the inspired teachers of humanity, who through years of self-restraint and self-culture have so purified their intellectual and moral nature as to recognize in their fulness and glory the invisible spiritual realities around. They are the true reformers, since by spiritual intuition they see things *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is their actions that become the standard of morality—so proclaims the *Gītā*.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।
स यत् प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥

Thus the responsibility of effecting sane and necessary reforms rests on these natural leaders. Of course, we must at every stage be prepared for transvaluation of values, but it is the habitudes of thought and action of the best representatives of the community which organize into *Āchāra* and serve

as the criterion of everyday conduct. The whole of man's life, all its purposes, all its meaning and value receive their tone and colour from the ideals, institutions and moral habits among which his life develops. Without the *Sadāchāra* the individual would be practically helpless in determining the right courses of action in various situations. It is fortunate for progress that this is so; for without these models of right action, each would be thrown on his own resources of reason and experience. Such a course would quickly reduce social life to a chaos. If everyone had to start anew to frame all his ideals and make his laws, we should be in as melancholy a plight morally as we should be intellectually if we had to build each science afresh. The fundamental safeguards which the *Sadāchāra* provides against individual impulse and passion, the conditions of close association, interdependence and mutual sympathy which the group affords, and the habituation to certain lines of conduct valued by the group—all this is a root on which the stem and flower of personality naturally grows.

SWADHARMA

Thus the first and foremost duty of every Hindu is loyal adherence to, and whole-hearted performance of, his *Swadharma*. It is the set of duties which are in perfect harmony with the essence of one's being. The *Gītā* assures us that man reaches perfection by being intent on his own duty—'स्वे स्वे कर्मण्यभिरतः संसिद्धिं लभते नरः' Performance of one's own duty has the merit not only of perfecting the individual and contributing to social solidarity; it is also the best form of worship of God—

'स्वकर्मणा तमभ्यर्च्य सिद्धिं विन्दति मानवः ।'

This is the abiding worth of Hindu Ethics: here we find the glorious consummation of the fusion of moral doing and religious devotion. The

health and solidarity of the whole depends on each of the parts retaining its own position, and appropriately fulfilling its own function. Social organization is a co-operative enterprise in which all the members are equally important and equally valuable. In the interests of the strength and integrity of the whole each should keep on to his station in life determined by birth, education and environment, and do full justice to it by functioning there properly. The concept of "My Station and Its Duties"—the culminating point in the ethical teaching of Hegel and Bradley in Europe—is but a faint and belated echo of the clarion call of *Swadharmā*. Our duties are determined in relation to the station we occupy in society. *Swadharmā* shows us that duty is a living, concrete act which depends on the station and function of the man in the social organism. The individual's self-identification with universal ideals and institutions enriches his personality, and affords new opportunities for self-expression. The doctrine of *Swadharmā* was promulgated by our Law-givers with the avowed object of establishing an ideal community in which the complete life of each of its members is promoted to the utmost extent.

NIṢKĀMA KARMA

The essence of *Dharma* is that it ought to be done for its own sake. It has a dignity of its own, and should not be treated as a *means* to other ends. It is intrinsically valuable; it is an End-in-Itself. Non-attachment or indifference to the fruits of action is the central citadel of Hindu Ethics. Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives a clear warning: "Thy business is with action only, never with the fruits; so let not the fruit of action be thy motive, nor be thou attached to inaction."

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

Non-attachment makes us free and unconcerned, and effectively drives away grief and fear. *Niṣkāma Karma* is the crown and completion of ethical life. There is no room in it for selfish advantage and personal equation. The duties have to be done in absolute purity of motive. To discipline ourselves in *Chittaśuddhi* and qualify ourselves for the attainment of wisdom, the duties should be performed in a disinterested spirit. The *Gītā* points out that the harmonized person, having abandoned the fruits of action, attains to eternal peace—'युक्तः कर्मफलं त्यक्त्वा शान्तिमाप्नोति नैष्ठिकीम् ।' Apart from His unambiguous declaration that He is directly responsible for the conservation of values and the progressive realization of perfection (*Yogaśema*), Śrī Kṛṣṇa assures us that "never doth anyone who worketh righteousness tread the path of woe."

'न हि कल्याणकृत् कश्चित् दुर्गतिं तात गच्छति ।'

These are the traits of *Dharma*—the heart of Hindu Ethics. It is essentially dynamic from the beginning to the end, and nowhere is passivity or quiescence pointed out as the spirit of moral life. The fact is that *Nivṛtti*, *Vairāgya* and *Tyāga* have been emphasized as the genuine marks of ethical life. We are committed to action, whether we like it or not; therefore it is but right that we do our duty gracefully, that is, without attachment and selfish motives. *Dharma*, *Vairāgya*, and *Jñāna* are the most cherished watchwords of the Hindu Ethical system. They furnish the key to the understanding of the moral conduct of the Hindus, and constitute the basic foundation for the growth of social virtues and personal goodness, and contribute effectively to the solidarity and the enduring welfare of the community.