

# Dharma - The Universal Principle of Equilibrium<sup>1</sup>

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The word “dharma” is associated with many things that we do in our daily life. When we are told to adhere to accepted principles and norms of behavior, we refer to the word *dharmā* as a set of codified principles for good living. Whenever we mention about the changing ways in which things happen these days, we mention *yuga dharmā* and say that it is because of *kali yuga* that such things are happening. When we observe deterioration in overall societal practices, we say that *dharmā* has been vitiated. Sometimes the word *dharmā* is also used to refer to the obligatory duties that each individual has to do. Thus a doctor, a teacher, a trader, a son, a father or a wife have their own *dharmā* to follow. Another perspective to *dharmā* is that it is a collection of basic values that we all must practice. For instance, non-violence is one of the core elements of *dharmā* (अहिंसा परमो धर्मः - *ahimsā paramo dharmah*).

If for everything we use the word *dharmā* we can come to another conclusion. Perhaps, *dharmā* is a way of living. This is why the Indian religion and cultural practices are collectively weaved into a single term called *sanātana dharmā*. Even with this perspective we do not exactly know what role it plays. Every one of the above is a valid perspective of *dharmā*. The purpose of this writing is not to convince us of the validity of these alternative perspectives of *dharmā*. Instead, we shall try to understand what exactly is the fundamental role of *dharmā* and how does it make sense to various choices we need to make in our life. The moot question is what exactly we mean by *dharmā* at a fundamental level? Why do we need to follow *dharmā*? What happens when *dharmā* is vitiated? We shall see two *ślokas* from chapter 4 of the *Gītā* which provides some answers to these questions.

## Restoring dharma through Divine intervention

In *Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna describes the process by which *dharmā* is re-established. He explains the divine role in this process. Lord Krishna says that whenever there is a deterioration of *dharmā* (*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati*), on account of the uprising of *adharmā* (*abhyutthānam adharmasya*), He (the Lord) incarnates (*tadā ātmānam sṛjāmyaham*).

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।  
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥ 4.7

*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati bhārata*  
*abhyutthānam adharmasya tadā ātmānam sṛjāmyaham*

Lord Krishna clearly mentions the purposes behind the divine incarnation in the next *śloka*. First of all the good needs to be protected (*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām*) by destroying the evil forces in the society (*vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām*). This is a divine process undertaken in order to

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restore *dharma* (*dharma-samsthāpanārthāya*). Lord Krishna says that this process of divine incarnation happens from time to time (*sambhavāmi yuge yuge*).

परित्रणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।  
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥ 4.8

*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām*  
*dharma-samsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge*

Through these *ślokas* two main issues become evident to us. Restoration of *dharma* is a process that happens from time to time and therefore is a regenerative cycle. The other issue is that every such intervention is a step towards restoring the balance between good and evil forces. What is implied in the *śloka* is that when the proportion of the good dwindles, it becomes an unsustainable condition in the society. A simple understanding of this *śloka* reveals to us the *avatāra tatva*. However a careful understanding of the ideas presented in this *śloka* will point to certain important and larger principles pertaining to our life. We shall see these in some detail.

## **Dharma – A cardinal principle of equilibrium**

All the systems in this world (economic systems, social systems, natural systems and manmade physical systems) need to have stability. Without this, they may not sustain for long. They not only get destroyed but even destroy others in the process. For example, in a market, endless rise of prices of essential commodities is not a sustainable idea. It will eventually destroy the market forces and the market participants if left unchecked. Similarly, social systems need a sense of control and correction. Otherwise it will also become unsustainable. One can argue the same with respect to natural systems. Mindless exploitation of natural systems disturbs their equilibrium and may lead to unstable conditions, triggering some form of destruction as a means of self-correction.

The issue therefore is that the only way to have a sustainable way of managing these systems is to have checks and balances in the system. If the system deteriorates and threatens to become unstable, then some corrective mechanism needs to be applied. In the case of rising commodity prices some external interventions (by the government and policy makers) will restore equilibrium. If there are too many unquestioned evil and unfair practices in the society, it needs a great reformer to come and make the corrections. The role of Krishna in Mahabharata, *śankarācārya* during 7th century AD, or Buddha are examples of this category. Such people restore the confidence and faith in the systems bringing the social system back into the domain of sustainability. Natural systems have their own corrective measures. It required just about 3 hours for the catastrophic floods in the Himalayan region (*Kedārnāth*) in 2013 to wind the clock back by about 200 years and restore certain stability in the natural systems there.

All man-made systems such as complex machines and gadgets, business enterprises, temple management committees and governmental systems also have feedback and control mechanisms for their effective and sustainable working. Even take a simple issue of a grid

lock in a narrow four way junction in a busy metro such as Bangalore during the morning peak hour traffic. It requires a curious onlooker (who is a neighbourhood resident, not owning any of these vehicles) to jump into the fray, take charge of the situation along with a few of his friends and clear the mess.

What is common to all the above examples is the basic idea that from a simplest system to the most complicated one, sustainability is a function of our ability to ensure two things:

- (a) Detect when things go out of control
- (b) Have a corrective mechanism to restore it back to normal state

This is exactly Lord Krishna has conveyed in the above two *ślokas*. The grand notion of *avatāra puruṣa* is nothing but a mechanism to keep the system in a working condition. Viewed from this perspective, the entire range of people, entities and forces involved right from the person who cleared the traffic jam at the junction during peak hour to the massive natural force that wound the clock back at *Kedārnāth* by 200 years are nothing but repeated reminders to us the multi-faceted manifestation of the divine force through the concept of *avatāra puruṣa*.

The reason for systems going out of control is that the *dharma* is vitiated and a common representation of this is that the proportion of evil is much more than the proportion of good. Piling up of hundreds of vehicles is a measure of more evil during peak hour traffic. Mindless exploitation of nature, heavy deforestation of mountains, unchecked growth of man-made structures etc. are measures of evil in the *Kedārnāth* disaster example. Violating all norms of behavior, rule of the law, promises and contracts by the rulers themselves (as it happened in the case of Kuru dynasty headed by Duryodhana in Mahabharata) is a measure of evil leading to social unsustainability. Therefore, ensuring that *dharma* is not vitiated is the only way we can build sustainable systems.

### **Dharmic way of living**

Our ancestors have recognized this crucial link between *dharma* and sustainability. Not surprisingly, if we trace the root for the word *dharma* we will find that *dharma* is nothing but a set of ideas and principles by virtue of which sustainability is ensured (धारणात् धर्मः - *Dhāranāt Dharmah*). In the process of articulating them and making them a viable practical idea various *dharma śāstras* were written down. These *śāstras* addressed a multitude of situations and conditions under which the set of norms need to be followed.

It is also for this very reason of sustainability, perhaps, that we have *dharma* as the first of the four *puruṣārthas*. *Dharma* is the foundation for an individual to build his/her castle of hopes, aspirations and ambitions in life. Our efforts to fulfill these dreams require *artha*, the second *puruṣārtha*. Earning the material riches should never be done by vitiating *dharma*. Similarly, the desires that we fulfill (the third *puruṣārtha*) eventually must be in the ambit of *dharma* and *artha*. These governing principles apply not only to individuals but also social organizations, business enterprises and governance systems.

Unfortunately, in the modern day living we are told otherwise. We are first told to up our desires as that is considered as a great measure of what we can achieve. Even if we do not have the wherewithal to satisfy the desires we need to just go ahead. There are many credit card companies and lending institutions to fund our dreams. Finally as long as these are not restricted in any way we can also pursue *dharma*. This modern approach is akin to building a grand castle without a stronger foundation.

We have a vast majority of ancestral wisdom spanning over 1000s of years in the form of *purāṇās* and *dharma śāstras* that provides us with paradigms of good living. On the other side we have some ideas from the modern society that promotes alternative paradigms for living. These are in the process of being tested in the last 100 years. We also have our own experiences of seeing our kith and kin and other people in the society around us trying out alternative paradigms of living. We need to develop a subtle understanding of the implications of these choices.

Being wise or otherwise is a choice we need to make in life. Notwithstanding the choice we make the all-encompassing principle of *dharma* will call the shots as the sustainability of this wonderful divine creation called universe is far more important than an individual's petty desires and simple, albeit, unsustainable ideas about life. From time immemorial *dharma* has been winning hands down in this race.