Dharma - The Universal Principle of Equilibrium

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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 dharma 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 dharma 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 dharma has been vitiating. Sometimes the word dharma 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 dharma to follow. Another perspective to dharma 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 dharma (अहिंसा परमो धर्म: - ahimsā paramo dharmaḥ).

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

Restoring dharma through Divine intervention

In Bhagavad Gitā, Lord Krishna describes the process by which dharma is re-established. He explains the divine role in this process. Lord Krishna says that whenever there is a deterioration of dharma (yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati), on account of the upsurge of adharma (abhyaśitthānam adharmasya), He (the Lord) incarnates (tadā ātmānam sṛjāmyaham).

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य गुनिमर्भवति भारत ।
अध्युतंत्यमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजायहम् ॥ 4.7

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati bhārata
abhyaśitthānam 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 (paritrāṇaṁ śādhnāṁ) 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).

परित्राणयां साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।
धर्मसमस्यापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥ 4.8

paritrāṇāya sādhūnām 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 (Kedarnāth) 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 श्लोकas. The grand notion of अवतारा पुरुषa 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 केदारनाथ by 200 years are nothing but repeated reminders to us the multi-faceted manifestation of the divine force through the concept of अवतारा पुरुषa.

The reason for systems going out of control is that the धर्मa 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 केदारनाथ 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 धर्मa is not vitiated is the only way we can build sustainable systems.

Dharmic way of living

Our ancestors have recognized this crucial link between धर्मa and sustainability. Not surprisingly, if we trace the root for the word धर्मa we will find that धर्मa 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 धर्मa शास्त्रas were written down. These शास्त्रas 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 धर्मa as the first of the four पुरुषार्थas. धर्मa 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 अर्थa, the second पुरुषार्थa. Earning the material riches should never be done by vitiating धर्मa. Similarly, the desires that we fulfill (the third पुरुषार्थa) eventually must be in the ambit of धर्मa and अर्थa. 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 purāṇas 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 that an individual’s petty desires and simple, albeit, unsustainable ideas about life. From time immemorial dharma has been winning hands down in this race.