

Dharma : Purity and Pollution

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The rationale for the social practices are in the key ideal of *dharma* which defines the ritual duties of man towards God, and those actions ordained by God as good and righteous. *Dharma* comprises the norms and rules of a person, ritual position depending on his *varna*, caste, calling, age and sex. *Dharma* is not a blanket category identical for everyone; it is specific for each individual depending upon his or her ritual position and the circumstances in which he/she is placed. The *dharma* of a woman or the *dharma* of a thief includes such acts as are befitting a woman or a thief but not anyone else.

Dharma serves to resolve contradiction as to what is right and what is wrong? For example, a woman must obey her husband. If he asks her to do something that is otherwise considered wrong, it is still right for her to do it. Her duty to him demands it. To steal is in itself wrong but even a thief has his code of conduct which is his *dharma*. The act of stealing is not as bad as going against one's *dharma* as a thief. *Dharma* follows the divisions in society.

Society follows the pattern set by the cosmological phenomena. This is basically an expression of the continuity of natural and social phenomena, for all universe is one, merged into the ultimate Brahman. Cosmos is divided into four parts. The day is divided into four parts, *Subah* (morning), *Dopahar* (afternoon), *Sham* (evening) and *Rat* (night). The days are arranged according to seasons that are four in number, viz., *garmi* (summer), *varsha* (monsoon), *sardi* (winter) and *vasant* (spring).

The four division into which society is divided are the four *varnas*, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. As myth goes, the four *varnas* originated from four parts of the Brahman's body. The Brahmins are from the head, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaishyas from the belly (or thighs or armpits), and the Shudras from the feet. The head, arms, bel-

ly and feet form a ritual hierarchy, giving a ritual scale to the four *varnas*. The highest point, the head, is the purest and the feet, the least pure or most impure.

The three highest *varnas* symbolize their ritual purity, as compared to the Shudras, by wearing the sacred thread (*Janeu*). The *varna* classification is also a basis for occupational specialization.

The Brahmin serves in the purest of professions, being so near divinity. He is also the guardian of the ritual and moral order of society. The Kshatriya is the ruler and the warrior. He uses the strength of his arms and his weapons to preserve and protect. The Brahmin takes care of the other world, while the Kshatriya takes care of people in this world itself. In his work a Kshatriya, especially king or ruler, is closely associated with the Brahmin priests or *purohitas* who were attached to all kingly courts. The Vaishya is the trader and provider of food. The Shudras come last. They do manual work and handle impure things such as faeces, dirty clothes, dead animals. Their state of pollution is so perpetual as to render them impure or untouchable for ever.

The *Varna* classification becomes operational through *dharma*. Each of the four major *varnas* has its broad outline of conduct and occupation, and to follow it is to follow the dictates of caste and rank, purity and pollution, and associated cultural ideals. These ideals include wisdom of the Brahmin, valour of the Kshatriya, thriftiness of the Vaishya, and the skill of the Shudra.

The Brahmin, the religious practitioner combines the roles of temple priest; a suggester for method to propitiate and appease gods and goddesses, and for suggesting magical potents and prescriptions and for remedies to ill-luck; he is a fortune teller, a family advisor and as if that is not enough, a match-maker in marriages.

The role of the Brahmin as a pundit as popularly known by his calling, can be broken up

in *purohit* and *pujari*. The traditional *purohit* of a family or of a king, differs from a *pujari* in that the former is not only a *pundit* but he has desired the welfare of a particular family or king from a long time and over the generations.

The *purohit* has the responsibility of maintaining the lineage traditions of his patron, and if at any time there is a break in the tradition (as would be likely to happen if at any time, due to deaths, the remaining males in the household are only minor), he must give his advice and consolidate the family and try to pass on the lineage traditions to the growing-up generation. In addition, the responsibility of performing the last rites of the former king were not of his son but of the *raj purohit* of the kingdom. Further, it was his duty to recognize and set the heir of the late king on the throne.

He has knowledge to give and he may be called *Acharya* meaning ideally behaved. He is instrumental in seeing through marriages, births, deaths or crisis in family relations. The *purohit* must be guide for life-cycle ceremonies such as nomenclature *mundan* and thread wearing ceremonies for a boy and nomenclature and ear-piercing ceremony for a girl. Some children are born under *graha*, signs that are inauspicious either for them or their kin, e.g. father or mother. The *purohit* has to prescribe remedies or atonements as the case may be divined. Then, after a death he must have the *pinda dan* or offerings of rice balls performed.

With every family there should be a *purohit* whose work is to see the family overcomes difficulties, when there is sickness in the family, or there is great difficulty in achieving something like betrothing a girl of the family, or the business is suffering a loss, or a person may be finding it hard to get a job. Then the *purohit* must prescribe and conduct, if proper, the correct *pujas* and rituals.

All Brahmins are capable of becoming *pundits* but being a *purohit* is another thing. The *purohit* does not have to himself conduct the rituals nor does he have to offer daily prayers at the house of his patron. He must organise all this. In the event of the son of a *purohit* not taking on brahminical learning, he still remains a *purohit* because (he has learnt from

his father and) he knows of the lineage traditions of the family his father had served. The *purohit* is then (in a way) another member of his patron's family. It is the duty of the patron to see that the *purohit's* wants are satisfied; that he has food and clothes not only for himself but also for his family; that he has enough money to be able to perform rituals in style in his own family, and that his daughter does not remain unmarried for want of dowry.

Thus the *dharma* of the Brahmin lies in protecting the spiritual interest of his patrons, in giving advice on any matters relating to the divine and worldly matters as well. The reciprocal obligations of the patrons, comprising the Kshatriya and Vaishya *varnas* lies in protecting the Brahmin and the cow, and in honouring and providing for material needs of the Brahmins and the cows.

A Kshatriya is associated with strength and valour. Traditionally they are rulers and soldiers engaged in warfare and protection of masses. Drinking liquor, eating meat, living well and generously, are all accepted norms of the Kshatriya. A Kshatriya is not supposed to turn down any appeal for help. To protect is his *dharma*, specially protection of the weaker castes like Brahmins and Vaishyas, and the helpless such as women and dependents.

A Kshatriya is expected to be strong and aggressive, generous to the point of being spendthrift, honest, a staunch keeper of his word. It is said that promise made by a Kshatriya is never broken. In Ramayana, king Dasaratha, a Kshatriya, when confronted by Kaikeyi to grant her three boons, says a famous couplet often quoted for a Kshatriya: "*Raghukul reet sada chali aayee, pran jaye per vachan na jayee*". It means: in Raghukul it has always been the tradition that one may give up one's life but never one's promise.

Appropriately, a Kshatriya worships Durga and Kali; martial forms of the mother goddess. The worship may even take the form of offering sacrifices of animals and libation of liquor. For a Kshatriya, eating meat and drinking liquor are part of his life style, his *dharma*. These foods are taboo for the other twice-born *varnas*.

Traditionally, Kshatriya children, specifically boys but sometimes even girls were

trained in the martial arts. Women were encouraged to be brave and a support to their husbands in time of distress. History is replete with stories of Kshatriya women taking up arms to defend their honour. It was not at all inappropriate or contrary to norms for a Kshatriya woman to ride a horse or don men's clothes to enter the battlefield; actions which would be considered totally immoral and against societal norms for women of any other *varna*. In Mahabharata we have Chitrangada and Shikhandi, both princesses, trained in warfare just like men and performing bravely in battle. Historical figures such as Maharani Lakshmibai of Jhansi conform to such ideals.

The traditional identification of the Vaishya, popularly called *baniya* is with the occupation of trade and commerce, a calling religiously followed by many of them even today. One of the important cultural ideals of the *baniya* is thrift. Thrift implies that goods are denied to one's self and one's family members, even if one has the capacity to purchase them. A spend thrift nature is considered immoral, it is against the *dharma* of the *baniya*. For a *baniya* to undergo physical hardship and to subject himself to extremes of restraint in terms of consumption is part of his life, and this the *baniya* children are taught from childhood.

Right from their infancy, these children are taught to curtail consumption, not to ask for expensive foods or clothes, not to spend too much time in play, but to be useful around the house. Girls, more than boys, are taught to be restricted even in their movements, voice and laughter.

Accumulating money by pinching pennies is another norm to which the *baniya* strives. Nobody is surprised to see even a *baniya* millionaire wearing a dirty dhoti for it is his *dharma* to be a miser. In fact, if a *baniya* started living ostentatiously or did something really outrageous like becoming a poet, many eyebrows would be raised. The person would be considered a sacrilege to his caste group, and going against his *varna* and its *dharma*.

It is thus befitting that *Lakshmi* (goddess of wealth) is one of the most important deities for the *baniya*. A myth relates as to how *Lakshmi* has a natural affinity for the *baniya*. *Lak-*

shmi went at night to the houses of the member of each *varna*. Except the *baniya* the rest were too sleepy to welcome her. The *baniya* entertained her and gave her an honourable place.

Non-violence is another important norm. A *baniya* is not expected to show physical aggression. Any kind of violence on the part of the *baniya* is immoral. By their norms they do not eat meat, fish or eggs, and also do not touch liquor.

Thus is case of *dharma* and its relationship to different *varnas* it can be truly said that what is one man's meat is another man's poison. Thus, *dharma* is a situational concept applying differently to different persons. Not only *varna* and caste but sex and age also serve to distinguish *dharma*. What is appropriate and normative for a particular age group or sex is taboo or immoral for others. Thus, when a child plays pranks and generally makes a nuisance of himself, indulgent adults may say, it is his *dharma* to be naughty. When a snake bites, it may be said that it is the snake's *dharma* to bite.

For a woman, the supreme *dharma* is to serve her husband. In Hindu society there is no woman more meritorious than the loyal and faithful wife. It is also the duty of the wife to share her husband's occupation. A Brahmin's wife should be learned, accomplished and beautiful. A Kshatriya's wife should be brave and encourage her husband in the performance of his duty; a *baniya*'s wife should be thrifty and docile. A Shudra's wife should be hard-working and help her husband in his work. A woman should blindly obey and follow her husband and submit herself to all his wishes.

A woman was sitting with her husband's head in her lap. The husband was sleeping soundly. The woman's child was playing some distance away and began to crawl dangerously towards the fire. The woman thought, should she get up, disturb her husband's sleep, and go and save her child from burning itself from the fire, or should she let the child be burnt and not disturb her husband's sleep? This is a riddle and the devout is asked to answer. The correct answer is that the woman should not get up and disturb her husband to go and

save the child. If she is doing her duty to her husband, God himself will look after the child and the child will turn away from the fire.

A man's duty is to look after the family, protect its members from harm and perform his appropriate duty in society. The last depends upon his caste and position. A husband need not obey his wife, but he is expected to keep her happy and protect her. He is also to provide for her and take up all responsibilities such as looking after her in sickness, both socially and ritually however, the position of the man is higher than the woman; and though a wife is referred to as *ardhangani* that is half of the man, yet social norms dictate that she be submissive.

The only position in which a woman is higher than the man is as a mother. Society grants a very high position to the parents, both father and mother. Children are to obey and respect the wishes of their parents under all circumstances. Defying parents or hurting them in any way is going against one's *dharma*. To look after parents in their old age, to serve, respect and obey them is an act of great merit and brings a lot of merit. In Mahabharata we have the story of Bhishma who, for the sake of his father, put himself to life-long abstinence, and was blessed that he will die only when he wishes. Again Sharawan Kumar is a boy who carries his old parents in baskets, and takes them to various pilgrimage centres. This story is often retold.

Dharma is thus specific to every status and role in society, like the *dharma* of a king, of a soldier, of a priest. It is also time-bound and situational. In the battlefield, for instance, the *dharma* of a soldier is to fight and kill the enemy. In the field of battle there are no relationships and no other duties that should hinder the soldier in the performance of his task. Similarly, *dharma* changes with the ages. In every age (*yuga*) there is a *yuga-dharma*; what was right in *Satyug*, need not be right in *Kalyug* as well. Basically, it means that man must act according to the dictates of the time and the situation at hand. Man's *dharma* in *Satyug* was to perform rituals and sacrifice, in *Kalyug* it is primarily to do one's *karma*.

Each of the four *varnas* are associated with different degrees of purity, the Brahmins be-

ing the purest and the Shudras least pure, to the extent of being untouchable. Distance is maintained among the *varnas* through lack of commensality and social interaction persons of different *varnas* do not sit together to eat or share the same *hookah*. This differentiation extends to different caste groups arranged hierarchically within each *varna* and sometimes, even to sub-divisions within the same caste.

Through each of the upper three *varnas* maintain their social distance from each other, the mere touch of the Shudra is capable of causing pollution.

The concepts of purity and pollution extend beyond the precincts of caste and every Hindu religiously maintains taboos of touch and social distance in day-to-day life.

What is understood as purity and pollution is basically a four-fold division between that which is clean and that which is dirty; that which is pure and that which is impure; that which can be touched and that which is not touched; and that which is *jhoothan* and that which is *suchaha* - the last-named pair referring to contamination by saliva, *jhoothan* being contaminated.

The basis of this classification is the sense-perceptions. Clean and dirty to the sense of sight; pure and impure to the sense of smell; and touch and no-touch to the sense of touch; and salival contamination being related to the sense of taste.

Within the household, the kitchen is basically *shuddh* (pure) area because dirt from the streets with its foul smells, coming by way of shoes of the people or otherwise, is not allowed to enter the kitchen. If perchance child defeacates or urinates in the kitchen, the cleaning is almost immediately done, just as in a temple. The idea is that something that is *shuddh* has to be constantly kept clean. Women will bathe and wear clean clothes when they enter the kitchen to cook a meal and will not allow any child to come into the kitchen, so that she is not even touched by one. This further allows women to concentrate on the cooking without having to distract their attention.

Similar to the kitchen is the place earmarked for worship. Here, the taboo on touch does not strictly operate. Here or in the temple, the *prasad* offered to God, once it is touched to the God,

mouth or otherwise offered to it, becomes contaminated by God, but remains very pure for human consumption. And so is the case with the other three classifications which are relative to the situation. In fact, goddess Parvati created a very pure being, that is Lord Ganesh, out of the dirt of her body.

The concept of contamination by taste is also applicable to commensality in the household. A man will not eat food that is tasted by anyone else and only his wife and children will eat in the plate contaminated by him.

The sphere of the household where the idea of *ashuddh* (impure) applies is the latrine which is so impure that one has to take bath after coming out of it, and the clothes worn while defecating have to be washed.

The scavenger or *bhangi* who comes to clean the foul-smelling latrine is also an impure being of the Shudra *varna* and not to be touched. Others who engage in foul-smelling occupations such as leather workers (the *chamars*), consequently, fall into the same category as the *bhangi*. And analogously, those who are associated with other human excretions and cleanliness such as barbers (*nai*) and washerman (*dhobi*) are also Shudra. Further, all those who work in manual professions, in hard labour, get relegated to the Shudra fold which includes all artisans.

A wife is the complement to her husband. Both should have been brought up in similar ways. Thus, people must marry within the *varna*. This principle is extended to smaller caste groups within the *varna* as well. The castes belonging to higher *varnas* are divided for purpose of marriage into 4, 8 or 18 divisions called *gotra*. A person belongs to the *gotra* of his or her father. A sacred duty of all Hindus is to marry according to dictates of *varna*, caste and *gotra*. One must marry within the *varna* or caste but outside the *gotra*. A *sagotra* (within *gotra*) marriage is against *dharma*, for all person belonging to the same *gotra* are supposed to have descended from the same ancestor. It is the man's *gotra* or the father's *gotra* that is crucial, though in some caste groups mother's *gotra* may also be taken into account.

Thus *dharma* sets the norms of action in society. The actual deeds that a man may perform in society are, however, his *karma*, while

dharma is the normative, *karma* is the actual repertory of actions performed by each individual. *Dharma* is to be understood at the level of the situation. Karma is measured according to the yardstick of *dharma*. Action conforming to *dharma* is right and good, while action going against *dharma* is wrong and bad. The *karma* of an individual is the sum total of good and bad deeds performed in this world. *Dharma* and *Karma* are the basis of theory of transmigration viz., Birth-Death-Birth, and so on endlessly.

Whatever a man undergoes or gains in this world and the next is not a matter of choice or blind fate but meticulously measured out according to his *karma*. The cycle of reward and punishment is not confined to a single birth but, as the soul passes through its various incarnations, it carries its *karma* with it. A man born in a good household and high caste is reaping the fruits of the *karma* of his previous incarnations.

For a practising Hindu, to do *karma* is to live according to his *dharma*, to accept his ascribed (caste) position in society and perform his duties to the best of his abilities. To show dissent against his position or place in society is not part of the Hindu course of action (*karma*), for any state, good or bad, is regarded as well deserved according to past *karma*. And one can presently do better *karma* and reap the fruits later, when the soul is reborn with a different *dharma*.

The so-called passivity of the Hindus lies not in his fatalism (belief in blind *kismet*) but in the expanded time-dimension in which he views himself. Time for the Hindu is practically limitless; what he is suffering today may be a result of sins committed much before his present existence. Similarly, what he may gain by righteous action may be rewarded to him in a later birth.

CONCLUSION

The twin tenets of *karma* and *dharma* are a great moral force. The believer and the non-believer are both affected by it. The behaviour of the believer is guided by this philosophy while the non-believer is forced by the moral pressure brought on by the believers. The per-

son who has acted according to his *dharma* and also done good *karma* goes to heaven while the person who has not followed his *dharma* and done bad *karma* goes to 'hell'.

The idea that 'heaven' or *Swarag* and 'hell' that is *Narak* exist supports the philosophy of *dharma* and *karma*. Today, however, the non-believers far out number the believers. It is jocularly said that one would like to go to 'hell' rather than 'heaven'; because 'hell' is where all the filmstars and their likes would be while 'heaven' would be a dull and dry place. Thus while, *karma* and *dharma*, 'heaven' and 'hell' are common knowledge, in behavioural terms they are so as to say blocked out or put aside.

There is in fact a general decline in the pre-occupation with religion. The reason is not far to seek. There is a demarcation of life between the sacred and profane. Once a person has visited the temple or organized a 'jagran' which is a night long vigil with singing of the praise, of the mother goddess Durga his religious duty and good deed is over. For the rest he gets down to the practical aspects of dealing with the vexation of day-to-day life, wherein corruption and sharp practices are the order of the day. For the faithful the decline in the philosophy of *dharma* and *karma* is an indication of the fact that we are living in the *kalyug* age. Thus is an age when evil triumphs and people forget God. The query of the non-believers that who has seen 'heaven' and 'hell' is answered by the faithful that 'heaven' and 'hell' are right here on earth. Retribution for not performing one's *dharma* or doing bad *karma* is delivered right here on this earth in this very life span. The argument is valid even though it goes against the idea of the transmigration of the soul.

It was believed that the consequences of bad actions would be not only by the body going to 'heaven' or 'hell' but also by the soul taking rebirth in a lower order of living things which includes animals but not plants. These arguments go well and the logical conclusion of the fact that 'heaven' and 'hell' are here and

one has to undergo the profits and perils of one's deeds on earth in this very life is a mutation not very logical. This contradicts the theory of transmigration of the soul. But logic is not the forte of religion or religious thinking in particular.

This is in the context of the fact that there are many instances that are talked about and believed to be true of children remembering their previous birth. Another instance of there being a contradiction in beliefs and values regarding *dharma* that the gift of a maiden in marriage is considered the greatest act of *dharma*. Yet there is a marked preference for boys. A woman who gives birth to a large numbers daughters can be maltreated in her affinal household. The preference for boys and lack of preference of girls is based on the profane aspect of marriage that is the custom of dowry. Well settled boys command a high dowry in the marriage market place while the performance of *dharma* the gift of a daughter is not considered act of *dharma* as the vexatious problems of providing a dowry.

Thus *dharma* and *karma* are tied up in intricate ways to the life of Hindus. The resilience that these show makes Hinduism as the Sanatan *Dharma* or the eternal faith.

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ABSTRACT The key concepts of *dharma* and *karma* are comprised of purity and pollution practices as well as *pun* and *pap* respectively. These concepts relate Hinduism to the social and cultural life of the people. Each *varna*, caste calling, profession and even an individual has his own *dharma*. *Karma* however is an individually oriented concept. *Dharma* and *Karma* are related to each other for *karma* is to be judged not only on its own merit but also with regard to purity and pollution practices. The relation between the cultural life of the Hindu and his religious life is further cemented as it concerns the *varnas*, caste, professional calling and even the *yuga*. Thus the individual is tightly bound to behave in certain ways whatever be his status and role in life.

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