

From Rta to Constitutional Duties: The Evolution of Dharma in the Bharatiya Political & Philosophical Tradition

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Abstract

In Bharatiya traditions, the concept of Dharma has meant as the path of righteousness, duties and truthfulness, and has been discussed in the texts since ancient traditions. This study shall trace the evolution of Dharma across the ages and understand the journey from the cosmic order *Rta* in Rigveda has lived in the human society and taken form of moral and universal order. This paper has thoroughly focused on the verses and the teachings of ancient texts and traditions. The study dived into the writings of various Bharatiya thinkers and philosophers such as Kautilya and court members such as Abul Fazl and leaders such as Ahilyabai Holker, from Sri Aurobindo to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, from Swami Vivekananda to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, from M.K. Gandhi to Dr. Hedgewar, and from Jawaharlal Nehru to K.M. Munshi. The paper has studied the discussions of Constitutional Assembly Debates. In this paper, the value of Dharma has been traced from the Directive Principles of State Policies and Fundamental Duties. And similar values have also been traced across the rule of different governments in Bharat. This paper has also discussed the western concept of Religion and traced the role of spirituality led religious values in reviving the nationalistic values and its relationship with the Dharma. Thus, this study extensively deals with the political and philosophical roots of Bharatiya values of Dharma which transformed from *Rta* to Constitutional Duties.

Keywords: Bharatiya Political Traditions, Constitution of Bharat, Dharma, Duties, Indian Knowledge System, *Rta*

Introduction

Bharat is in the southern part of the continent Asia, which is the seventh largest nation of the world, that is 32,87,263 sq. km. Bharat has an extensively diverse population with various cultures and traditions. The name Bharat for this territorial land came much later between the 5th and 12th centuries (Avari, 2016). To understand the philosophy of Dharma, the Bharatiya philosophy should be focused on. The Dharma can be referred to as the right way of living or the divine law or path of righteousness (Rosen, 2006).

Dharma, through the study of vedic and post-vedic texts, can be understood as a duty. This philosophy of Dharma talks about the truth, duties, and the right way. Politically, in the Bharatiya territory, what can be traced as a way of governance or rule was monarchy or the rule of the king, the Raja. This brings the philosophy of Rajadharma which discusses the duty of kings and the righteous way a king should follow up.

Dharma has been a widely used term in the context of Bharatiya philosophy since ancient times. The understanding of Dharma varies at different times with different contexts. Dharma can be defined as righteousness or duties. This study shall provide us with evidence that the evolution of the term ‘Dharma’ happens and thus, the Duties are in continuation with the essence of Dharma.

Evolution of Dharma

The term “Dharma” has derived from the Sanskrit word “Dhri”¹ which means to hold, to sustain and to maintain, and this, then articulates the real meaning of Dharma as the value that holds together the universe and the place of the individual in it. In the discussion of evolution of Dharma in the Bharatiya sub-continent, the study should be conducted from the perspective of Bharat. Bharat locates in the southeastern part of Asia, which is very isolated geographically, as in north, it surrounds by the range of Himalayas, and it is surrounded by two seas in east and west of the nation, that are Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea respectively and further surrounded by the Bharatiya ocean in the south of the nation. This paper studied a lot of texts of this territory where the evidence witnessed how the Dharma evolved across different time periods.

The oldest text, the Rigveda, which dates to 1500 BCE², talks about the society where the cosmic order ‘Rta’ was followed. However, in the following hymns of Rigveda, it is often found the words made of Sanskrit term ‘Dhr’ such as Dhranya (foundation), Dhaman (established order or law), Dhranyate (power to uphold), Dhamana, Dharta and Dharana (principle of sustenance, steadfastness and stability). These have indirectly shown the essence of Dharma. While the direct mention of the term ‘Dharma’ as Dharmani which is meant with laws and ordinances on which society persists.

¹ The terms made up of the *Dhri*, *Dhr*. (2022, May 31). Wisdom Library.
<https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/dhri>

² The oldest text, the Rigveda, must have been more or less contemporary with the Mitanni texts of northern Syria/Iraq (1450–1350 bce) [Flood, G.D. (Ed.). (2003). The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism. Wiley. ISBN: 978-0-631-21535-6]

In the other Vedic text, Atharvaveda which dates to 1200 BCE³, shows the direct usage of the term Dharma which means an upholder of laws. Dharma discusses righteous principles, it embeds the world's structure. And the continuity of cosmic order (Rta) is conceived now as the ethical order of Dharma. The Dharma has then been seen as the moral order which is the foundation of the whole universe. In conclusion, Dharma has also been seen as a functional unit of the natural world as it is so impacted that Rain falls by Dharma and Sun shines by Dharma.

Upanisads are majorly understood as an extended part of Vedas, documented in the post vedic era. The oldest upanisad, Brhadaranyaka Upanisad established the doctrine of Rajadharma. Where Dharma became the source of becoming great. Dharma is greater than the King. As Dharma is a moral law, it has been stated that the idea of sovereignty must be subordinate to it. Dharma is treated equally as truth, thus confirming the ethical and metaphysical foundation as equal. Dharma has been seen as king, justifying no one is above the Dharma, which emphasizes justice as ultimate sovereign and establishing Dharmarajya.

In the Chandogya Upanisad, Dharma has been portrayed as the bridge between the cosmic (divine) and ethical (human) existence, which establishes the supremacy of Dharma and meaning it to liberation (moksha) (Lokeshwaranand, 1998). In the Taittiriya Upanisad, Dharma has been defined as moral and spiritual law as in the Lesson 11 The Exhortation where it is stated that Treat thy mother as a God; as a God treat, thou, thy father; as a God shalt thou treat thy teacher; thy guests as Gods shalt thou treat (Sastry, 2007).

In the Katha Upanisad, Yama asked one to not speak untruth to one who is pure and faithful, for such falsehood leads one away from the path of Dharma. Through this upanisad, it has been stated for the first time that the Dharma path is the path of righteousness.⁴ Through the Isha Upanisad, it is stated that Karma means the righteous duty and performance of one's duty without any attachment is upheld as ideal life or Dharma.⁵

³ Pertinent parameters include the first use of iron (in a post-Rigvedic text, the Atharvaveda, at ca. 1200/1000 bce. [Flood, G.D. (Ed.). (2003). The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism. Wiley. ISBN: 978-0-631-21535-6]

⁴ A Dialogue with the God of Death from Katha Upanisad <https://upanishads.org.in/stories/a-dialogue-with-the-god-of-death>

⁵ Discussing the meaning of verses of Isha Upanisad. <https://shlokam.org/ishavasya-all-verses>

The oldest Dharmashastras, Manusmriti which dates back from 2nd BCE to 3rd century BCE⁶, defines the Dharma as the sustainer of all beings, foundation of truth, justice and social harmony. A king should be a just ruler as the personal emotions of greed, anger or fear must not override Dharma and justice. Dharma makes the king an upholder of law (*The Laws of Manu*, 1964). Yajnavalkya Smriti establishes the nine means for accomplishment of Dharma for all that are, Non-violence, truthfulness, absence of envy, absence of malice, forgiveness, steadfastness, companion, purity and humility (Pushpalatha, 2022).

The Narada smriti stated that the legitimacy comes from Dharma, customs and king's authority. His main duty is to seek disputes and punish wrongdoers. Dharma is the only law and is only absolute authority and the king so (Nath, 1987). Brihaspati Smriti states the supremacy of Dharma and defines it as a foundation of society. Vedas, Smriti, Custom and Royal edict are the four sources of Dharma (Aiyangar, 1941). In Sukra Niti, The value of king's happiness is represented in the happiness of the praja (people), thus it can be said that the people's welfare makes the king happy and thus his Rajadharma attains the rule and thus the Dharma persists in the Bharatiya society (Sarkar, 1914).

In the Bharatiya traditions, the prevalent form of governance was the rule of king or monarchy, especially the rule of empires, such as the Gupta empire or the Mauryan empire. Around the 4th century CE⁷ Kautilya gave the Arthashastra, which consists of the treatise on how a king should rule and what the policies should be. In the traditions of Arthashastra, the threefold vedic ends of human life have been discussed, which are Dharma, Artha, and Kama. Dharma is upheld, but it should be grounded in the actuality of state and economy. Here, Rajadharma is to protect and nourish the conditions of state under which Dharma can sustain. He should avoid unrighteous and unjust acts to maintain own Dharma. Kautilya gave the Saptanga theory in the Arthashastra, which deals with the body-politics of the state where the state is supposed to be a human body whose head represents the King or the Raja, the central element of sovereignty (Kautilya, 1992).

Dharma in the Bharatiya traditions are very evident through literature, texts, and history. The history discusses the ages of Ramayana and Mahabharata. As per the Ayodhya

⁶ If the Manusmriti is indeed the oldest versified dharmashastra and if we accept, with the majority of scholars, that it was composed between 200 bce and 200 ce (the time when the Mahabharata was about to reach its final form), then all dharmasutras are older than 200 bce, and all dharmashastras other than Manu's are more recent than 200 ce. [Flood, G.D. (Ed.). (2003). *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*. Wiley. ISBN: 978-0-631-21535-6]

⁷ Introduction. [Olivelle, Patrick (2013), *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient Bharat: Kautilya's Arthashastra*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0199891825]

Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana, Rama embodies the Dharma in human form; he seems to be the protector of Dharma (Sharma, 1927). Among the threefold vedic ends, Dharma, Artha and Kama, Dharma is the supreme and thus, while choosing exile for the fourteen years, he chose the Dharma (righteousness) over Artha (kingship) and Sukha (pleasure) (Tulsidas, 2022).

As per the Santi Parva of Mahabharat, the purpose behind the establishment of Dharma was to sustain the world. As Dharma upholds the cosmic, moral and social order, thus the very foundation of *rta* and *Nyāya*. The King should protect all his subjects with attention and righteousness (Dharma). Bhishma listed the six elements of Rajadharma, that are protection of people, administration of justice, ensuring livelihood, protection of law and learning, upholding righteous needs and promotion of virtue.⁸ The very first duty of the king is Prajapalana (protection of people). The king is the instrument of Dharma on earth. Dharma may exist in vedas but it is actualised through ruler's actions (Vedvyas, 2015).

In the 18th century, Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795) was one of the great rulers who was seen as the living embodiment of the Dharma in her governance. The essence of Rajadharma in the Ahilyabai's reign has redefined the concept of kingship in the nationalistic view where she spent the revenue of the state for the good of citizens; she listened to the voice of the most far. She became the prototype of what good governance in Bharat should be, especially under the virtue of *Stree shakti* as *Dharma shakti*.

Around a century later, in the 19th century, T. Madhava Rao (1828-1891)⁸ gave lectures to Sayajirao Gaekwad III about the roots of Dharma and Rajadharma with an essence of modernity through constitutional morality, administrative efficiency, welfare of the public and ethical kingship. He interpreted the western principles of governance (law, accountability, meritocracy) through the Bharatiya Dharmic sensibility that a ruler's sacred duty (Rajadharma) was to ensure justice and welfare for all. He defined Dharma as a moral duty of a ruler, where the first duty is to rule justly. He defined that the government exists not as the beneficiary of the ruler but for the government. He advised the ruler to remember that wealth, power, and glory are transient, but the goodwill of his subjects is immortal. He suggested the ruler to be wise by being foresighted and not passionate. He stated that the state should recognize all religions with equal favor.

In the late 19th century, Swami Vivekananda visited the various cities of US and England to give speeches on Dharma and Vedanta. His 4 lectures from Colombo to Almora discussed his views on Dharma as National Awakening. Through his lectures, he

⁸ Biography of Sir T. Madhava Rao [A National Biography for India, Volume 1 By Jyotir Chandra Das Gupta, Page 64-80]

redefines Dharma as the spiritual and ethical essence of the Bharatiya Civilization, expressed the Sanatana Dharma as the soul of Bharat whose national ideals are renunciation and service. He redefines the essence of Rajadharma as Tapasya (sacrifice) and not as authority. He asserted that the destiny of Bharat is to guide the world through Dharma, not material conquest, and thus Rajadharma transformed into civilizational leadership. Here, Dharma is the moral responsibility to restore harmony and unity among humanity, the teaching of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (Vivekananda, 2018).

In the late 1880s, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, to join the politics actively and led the mass movement to revive the values of nationalism among the masses, left the Deccan English Society and the Fergusson College, which were established by Tilak. In 1893, Tilak started organizing the Sarvajanik Ganesh Mahotsav, turning in-house celebration of Ganesh Utsav into public event where worship, dance, music and social gathering were organized. And, in 1895, Tilak institutionalized the celebration of Shivaji Jayanti publicly to influence Shivaji's ideas of Swarajya. However, Tilak through the community-wide programs aimed to influence the values of cultural nationalism and revived the values of Dharma in the hearts and minds of people (Tilak & Tilak, 2019).

In the early 20th century, Sri Aurobindo Ghose wrote a political pamphlet ‘Bhawani Mandir’ in 1905 in response to the partition of Bengal. He used the idea of forming a temple, Bhawani Mandir, to articulate a spiritual theory of Nationalism, where nation itself is the embodiment of Dharma, personified as the Goddess Bhawani, the mother and Shakti. He redefines the Dharma and Rajadharma as national duties, not only of rulers but of citizens who are committed to the liberation of the motherland. He symbolized the mother or the shakti as the source of Dharma, that is Sanatana Dharma. He provided the universal vision that Sanatana Dharma is not for Bharat alone, but it is for upliftment of the world. Sri Aurobindo, through the Bhawani Mandir, established a bridge between ancient Rajadharma and modern National Ethics with the convergence of Spiritual liberation (Moksha) and Political liberation (Swaraj) (Aurobindo, 1905).

The national freedom struggle became a movement with the advent of M.K. Gandhi in 1915, through this book “Hind Swaraj: Indian Home Rule”, had not only criticized colonial modernity, but gave a profound reinterpretation of Dharma and Rajadharma through the lens of his philosophy of Swaraj (self-rule). He equates Dharma with Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence). Gandhi directly linked civilization with Dharma and not material growth; thus, true civilization (sabhyata) is moral living conduct based on satya and ahimsa. He defines Rajadharma from being a ruler's duty to being a collective moral discipline. Thus, Swaraj is the idea assimilated with the ideas of Dharma and Rajadharma only (Gandhi, 1909).

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar through his text, “Hindutva: Who is a Hindu” separates Hinduism (a set of religious beliefs) from Hindutva (the essence of being a Hindu). He interpreted Dharma as a national ethos where a moral and cultural code rooted in shared ancestry (Pitrubhumi) and sacred geography (Punyabhumi). Savarkar focused on defining Hindutva beyond religion by stating it as the values of civilization of Hindus. Hindus have been described as those individuals who regard the land of Bharat Varsha as both his Fatherland (Pitrubhumi) and Holyland (Punyabhumi). Savarkar reinterpreted the Rajadharma by fuses with nationalism as the king's duty to protect the sovereignty and unity of Hindu Rashtra (Savarkar, 1923). The Bharatiya freedom struggle has been run by various leaders worked for the freedom struggle and for the unity of the citizens.

Tracing Dharma in Constitution of Bharat

When the national freedom movement got established with a single aim to get the sovereign Bharat, British colonial power proposed the Cabinet Mission Plan⁹ in 1946 to devise a plan to transfer the power to Bharat. In the first session of the Constituent Assembly, on December 13, 1946, while discussing the Aims and Objective of the Constitution of Bharat, Jawaharlal Nehru said, “Governments are, in fact, the expression of the will of the people”. K.M. Munshi argued that the Bharatiya must reflect the ancient tradition of Dharma Rajya, not as a theocratic state, but a system guided by rule of law and ethical-moral duty (17 Dec 1946 Archives).

Part 5 of the Constitution, Article 51A, it is hereby stated that every citizen shall abide by the duties, thus it can be considered as the Dharma of people (as of Prajadharma mentioned in Manusmriti and Arthashastra). To abide by constitution, respects the ideals and institutions, upholds and protects the sovereignty and integrity of the nation, thus imbibed the way every citizen should follow. On the other side, the Constitution of Bharat incorporates the values of Rajadharma, as mentioned in Article 38 under the Part 4, the Directive Principles of State Policy which obligates the state to construct social order conducive to justice and human well-being. This value directs the state to enforce the philosophy of Nyāya, where the rule of law persists providing moral as well as legal order. Nyāya gives the way to Rajadharma.

Political Transformations in Bharat

In post independence Bharat, got its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru elected in 1952 by the citizens of Bharat. The Nehruvian era witnessed the presence of values of Dharma and Rajadharma. His welfare state model and peaceful treaties with neighbors

⁹ <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/historical-constitution/cabinet-mission-plan-cabinet-mission-1946>

represented the essence of the values of Dharma. Due to internal disturbances, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed on the advice of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, proclaimed the National Emergency which portrayed as Authoritarian Moralism.¹⁰ Later, the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee after 2002 Gujarat Riots while advising the then Chief Minister, emphasized the idea of Rajadharma to be followed as a moral duty of the state (Hansen & Jaffrelot, 1998). The UPA led Government (2004-2014) boosted the rights-based welfare and provided the Right to Information Act as moral obligations of democratic states to protect the vulnerable.¹¹ This act justified the value of Dharma through inclusive development.

In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who contested the election with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won the elections. Since then, Bharat emphasized cultural revivalism, as Bharat now invokes the traditions of Ramrajya, Karmayoga and Dharma as the foundation of governance and national identity. This era focuses on the solution of unresolved issues back to decades and centuries, such as Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir, Debates of CAA and this period also focused on civilizational responsibility such as the influence of Ayurveda and Yoga on the International platforms and leadership on climate and developmental issues.

Conclusion

The system of governance gets transformed from monarchy to democracy. But the continuity of the duties of the governing body sustains, and that is Dharma. In monarchy, Raja had to govern to fulfill his duties as per his Rajadharma and in current democracy, Government must govern as per their duties asked to fulfill in the Constitution of Bharat. Righteousness and truthfulness have always remained the ideals of the ruler.

From Vedas to Upanisads and from Dharmashastras to Arthashastra, all of the scriptures and smritis have mentioned about the duty of the king and the powerful authority. The King derives his power from the Dharma, and it has been mentioned frequently that Dharma is above all. However, the similar tradition has been witnessed in the Mughal era, where Ain-i-Akbari discussed the similar obligations of the Ruler for the citizens, thus showing the presence of Dharma.

In the British era, it has been witnessed how our freedom fighters were focused on establishing the rule of Dharma again in Bharat by removing the colonizers. And, to establish the rule of Dharma in free Bharat, the discussion on the values of Dharma has

¹⁰ Kothari, R. (1989). *State Against Democracy: In search of Humane Governance*. New Horizon Press.

¹¹ Drèze, J. & Sen, A. (2013). *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*. Allen Lane.

been held from the Constituent Assembly Debates to the adoption of the Constitution of Bharat.

However, this has been seen that from the Nehruvian Welfare State model to Shastri's call for being self-sufficient for food, from Indira Gandhi's Authoritarian Moralism to Vajpayee's guidance for Rajadharma and from Manmohan Singh's obligatory actions to Narendra Modi's cultural revivalism and nationalism, all of these themes have worked in Bharat as the evidence for the presence of the values of Dharma in the heart of Bharat till day.

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