

Development of Hinduism

There are many forms of dharma: as an individual, one performs the vyaktigata (personal) dharma, as a member of a clan the kuladharmā (dharma of the clan), and then the jātidharma (as a member of a community). Then there was the dharma in accordance with the varṇāśrama, the Hindu law regulating the rights and duties of the four varṇas according to their āśrama (station in life). At the end, there was the sanātana dharma. Kṛṣṇa says that the small dharma will act as a part of the great dharma and if conflict arises, then one may discard the small in favour of the big dharma:

Sarvadharmān parityajya Māmekam śaranamvraja

(If the situation so demands, then one may even discard all dharma and come under the protection of God).

Kṛṣṇa thus places dharma on a psychological foundation and makes it practical and prefers that dharma which is universal and not just personal. Kṛṣṇa further explains the practical aspect of dharma by saying that everybody follows the path of dharma according to his swabhāva (nature). On the basis of triguṇa, the nature of man is created. Triguṇa is prakṛti (the designation of matter) as composed of sattva (light), rajas (energy, movement) and tāmas (darkness), which affects all material entities. Suppressing one's nature is not proper. To follow one's nature is justified (sreyān svadharmah). The thing which is not favourable to one's nature is not dharma. Svadharmā (one's own duty) is that which accords with one's nature, and to do that is sahajam karma. Niṣkāma karma is to follow one's duty without desire to avoid the pain and frustration consequent upon one's failure to achieve the goal. In fact, it is abandoning any attachment to action and egotism. But ultimately dharma is understood by ātmasamarpaṇa (surrender to God). Through dedication one obtains satya (true existence). This is the design created by *Mahābhārata* to explain the true nature of dharma. All the three elements, svadharmā, niṣkāmakarma and ātmasamarpaṇa together explain dharma.

One can conclude that ultimately the *Mahābhārata* urges a practical approach to dharma. Dharma is to be accepted as a value-based structure—the rule of inner nature that supports and sustains both the individual and the entire cosmos. The importance and significance of dharma can be summed up in the following verse of the *Mahābhārata*:

*Dharmo Viśvaśya jagataḥ pratiṣṭhā,
loke dharmistham prajā upasarpanti,
dharmeṇa pāpamaṇudati,
dharme śarvaṁ pratiṣṭhitam,
tasmāt dharmam paramam vadanti.*

(Dharma is the basis and sustaining power of the entire cosmic world. In this world, all entities evolve only by following the dharma. Through dharma, vices and evil get dissipated. All are subsumed in dharma. That is why dharma is said to be the most supreme).