CHAPTER - III
Transition to Dharma
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TRANSITION TO DHARMA

Dharma is the central ethical concept in the post-Rig-vedic Indian thought. It is the comprehensive ethical category in the light of which alone rest of the ethical ideals can be understood. It is both a definitional and a critical concept of seminal importance in all the systems of Indian philosophy, save the Carvakas. In Indian classical thought, we find the word dharma used in so many ways that Cromwell Crawford fittingly says "...to know India, try grasping the myriad forms of dharma, for in the depths of this single word lies an entire civilization."¹

Though dharma can be traced back to the Rig-veda, it no doubt acquired the status of an ethical category only in the Brahmanas and further gained definite structure in the Upanisads. The word occurs only once in the Rg-veda² and there too it appears as deity addressed in a group. In the Rg-veda, it was yet to be developed as a fulfilled ethical concept. Though in the later parts of the Rg-veda we find a gradual disappearance of rta, its place was not occupied by dharma. One reason for this is the fact that dharma owes its origin to a transition the Aryan society has undergone both in economic and intellectual spheres. Its origin is not independent but a part of the speculative scheme unfolded in the Brahmanas and the Upanisads. Hence the development of dharma is simultaneous with that of some important speculative concepts the latent impressions of which can be found in the Rg-veda. A proper understanding of dharma thus necessitates an analysis of its symbiotic corollaries. Before we undertake the evolution of dharma and analyze its structural relationship with other philosophical concepts, a note on the general uses of the word is in order.

¹ The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals, Introduction, p.xvi
² The Rg-veda, viii.85.13
Dharma and its Meaning

Dharma is a very comprehensive ethical concept which signifies differently in different contexts. It acquired, in the long history of Indian ethical thought, various senses and we always have to examine the context carefully before determining the sense in which the word is used. Again, the stipulated usage of the word with each philosophical system. However, there are certain common ways in which the word is generally used. The various uses of the word are not altogether disconnected but are complementary to each other and widened the scope of the concept. Dharma retained its essential ethical character all through the seemingly incompatible usages. Precisely this is what makes dharma a comprehensive ethical category which incorporates a wide range of ethical ideals.

In addition to the popular usage to mean Justice and Morality, the word dharma is used technically in six important ways signifying: 1. the law of a thing’s being 2. the ethical order 3. scriptural duties 4. object of human pursuit 5. religion and 6. righteousness. A brief explanation of the various denotations of dharma would help us, by the way, in understanding the concept in its entirety. In fact, they are rather six important aspects of the comprehensive notion of dharma.

The Law of A Thing's Being

Dharma in this primary sense refers to the essential nature of a thing without which it cannot exist. Dharma is the principle which defines, preserves, underlies and regulates a thing’s being. For example, fluidity is the dharma of water and if water loses fluidity, it will either become vapour or ice. Similarly, heat is the dharma of fire so that if it does not produce heat, it is not called fire. So, dharma is the basis for the existence of any thing: dharanat dharmaṁ ityahuh. The notion of dharma is of moral significance here when we understand what the essential nature, i.e., dharma, of man is. Man's dharma is

\[^{3}\text{Mahābhārata \text{xxii. } 109.14}\]
the fundamental idea from which all other moral concepts derive their meaning. All the Indian systems build their systems of morality on their notion of the essential nature of man. The Materialists who construe the man in terms of material elements end up in a morality which seeks sensuous pleasure as the highest principle. On the other hand, Advaita Vedanta which identifies individual with the absolute principle of consciousness (Brahman) places the realization of it as the ultimate aim of human existence. For most of the Indian schools understanding one's own nature and being it is the highest good. This is precisely why Indian ethics is inseparable from metaphysics. What is moral is always determined by what is real. What is morally good for man depends on what man essentially is. This is the most important methodological contribution of Indian ethics to the world.

The Indian systems differ as to what is morally good for they differ as to what the true nature of man. Despite metaphysical differences, all the Indian systems are almost unanimous on the methodological principle: man's being and his morality cannot be conceived independent of each other. In other words, real is moral Dharma thus denotes both real and moral. Dharma in its metaphysical aspect is the basis for dharma in its moral aspect and the latter is the extension of the former. This conception of dharma is accepted by both the orthodox and heterodox schools alike. This is one of the surest foundations of Indian ethics. Even in Buddhism, we find dharma signifying entity.

**The Moral Order**

Dharma in another important sense denotes the moral order. In Indian thought morality is never a matter of arbitrary adoption but always presupposes a moral order from which every moral principle derives its significance. Morality is not a sphere where blind forces hold their sway but a ordered universe having its own laws. Right from
the *Rg-vedic* age, Indian thinkers conceived a well established order both in the *cosmos* and in the moral world. The Cosmic Order when manifests in man becomes the Moral Order. The *Rg-vedic* conception of *ṛta* influenced and found continuation in *dharma*. *Dharma* inherited the sense of Moral Order from *ṛta* and expresses the fundamental ethical commitment of Indian thought to the notion of a unitary order in physical and moral aspects of the reality.

However, *dharma* differs from *ṛta* in certain respects. While *ṛta* is invariably connected with gods who uphold and execute the Cosmic Order, *dharma* acquired independence from gods in the later speculative scheme. *Dharma* has become an autonomous ethical order which hardly needed any divine support or intervention. This is an important development in the evolution of Indian ethics and marks the transition from theological world-view to the philosophical world-view.

The independent moral order is universally binding and follows its own course devoid of any divine arbitration. Even the most atheistic schools of India, for this reason, had no hesitation to incorporating *dharma* into their metaphysical and ethical systems. Man has to confirm to the higher order of universal dharma in order to preserve oneself. Such conformity leads to one's own welfare along with that of others. Hence *dharma* is viewed as basically of the form of welfare. Sabara in his commentary on *Mimāmsa Sūtras*, defines thus: Śreyaskara eva dharmah. This idea of *dharma* underlies further treatment of *dharma* in all the schools. It is worth noting here that in Indian thought, welfare does not always mean mere hedonistic pleasures though it includes them. *Dharma* as the independent moral order, when truly conformed to, would help one to keep one's own *dharma* and thus gains him welfare.
Scriptural Duty

*Dharma* in another important sense means moral duty in general and scriptural duty in particular. *Dharma* acquired this sense in the *Brahmanas*, the *Smrti* literature and the ritualistic school of *Pūrva Mimamsa*. The *Vedas* were considered by the brahmanical tradition as the repositories of highest ethical wisdom and conceived as of absolute authority. According to the *Pūrva Mimāmsakas*, the *Vedic* injunctions are the solitary source of *dharma*. This notion of *dharma* laid foundations for ritualistic morality on one hand and authority of the social codes on the other. While *Purva Mimamsa* deals with religious morality in terms of the *Vedic* ritualism, the codes of *Manu* and other law-givers derive the legitimacy of their codes from the authority of the *Veda*. However, there is one difference between Mimamsa and the *Smrtis*: while Mimamsa puts forth philosophical arguments for the authority of the *Veda*, the social codes presuppose it. But the notion that *dharma* consists in what is enjoined by the *Veda* is common to both of them. Hence, in the later brahmanical tradition, *dharma* came to mean the traditional morality supported by the *Veda*.

As we progress in our analysis of *dharma*, we find how the tradition is sought to be preserved in the *Smrtis* and how the *Vedic* ideas and notions influenced the later theories of *dharma* along with the moral practice in India. The social and political life in India was thoroughly moulded by the *Vedic* notions of morality and we find a continuity of the tradition in one form or other throughout the history of India. The survival value of the tradition owes, among other things, to the rational appeal it makes to the Indian mind.

Object of Pursuit

*Dharma* also denotes the moral pursuit of man. It is one of the four objects of human pursuit (*puruṣārtha*), the other three being *artha* (wealth), *kama* (desired pleasures) and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation). These *puruṣārthas* also suggest the individual attitudes
towards the world of objects. *Dharma* is considered as the most important, of all the *purusārthas*. *Dharma* has to be followed in all the human endeavors and thus it underlies all the other *purusārthas*. Even *mokṣa* cannot be attained by being indifferent to *dharma*. A morally degraded individual is not fit for *mokṣa* and cannot realize the ultimate truth. There is no short cut to *mokṣa* without attaining moral purity. *Artha* and *karma* if pursued without *dharma* are not commendable. Despite theoretical differences, this fourfold division of *purusārthas* is mostly accepted in Indian philosophical schools.

Religion

*Dharma* in its loser sense refers to religion in general. We often find appellations like *Bouddha dharma*, *Jalna dharma* etc., where *dharma* means religion. In India, the philosophical wisdom finds expression in religious practice. This is how Indian philosophy is of real practical significance. *Dhanna* as religion paves way for moral development and one experiences the religious life at its best through philosophical understanding of *dharma* as expressed in the religion. Religion imbibes moral principles and instigates their practice. Religion when practiced with a moral attitude becomes truly human.

Some of the major philosophical systems like Buddhism and Jainism are also popular-religions known for their moral insights and practice. In India, religion and philosophy go hand in hand because of their common ethical interest and practicability. In Indian tradition, knowledge without practice has no value. Knowing is practicing: *jñātva anusṭayet*. This amply speaks of the unity of theory and practice in Indian systems.

Now, let us have a close look at the way the various senses of *dharma* are connected organically to form a grand ethical system. *Dharma* as the justice or righteousnees which has to be adhered by every individual necessarily brings into picture the very nature of his being. What is good for man obviously follows from what he is. Further, man's nature is not independent but a part and parcel of the greater order in the universe
and thus involves a study of the nature of the universe and man's place in it. *Dharma* when denotes moral order brings this notion to relief. There is a greater moral order in which man's righteousness is a dependant part, and in this sense, morality transcends the realm of mere individual reference. The objectivity of the morality is emphasized here, and though man is the centre of the universe, he is not the defining principle in the universe. Man as a moral being has to confirm to the higher moral order which encloses the outer world as well. This notion of *dharma* as the order has twofold significance: first, it is holistic and secondly it emphasizes moral necessity. The objectivity of the ethical order which is beyond individual tastes is a greater insight offered by Indian ethics which is often attacked for its seemingly individualistic morality.

In the process of conforming oneself to the universe at large and the society in which one lives, one is bound to interact with the nature and fellow men in an ethical way. Man is related to the nature and fellow beings not just physically or materially but also morally. The essential relationship between man and the outer world necessitates man to adopt a moral view in all his pursuits or acheiving objects. Here, *dharma* takes the form of a necessary attitude or an object of pursuit which must underlie all his activities.

The soul of religion consists in man's recognition of the essential ethical relationship between himself and his surroundings. Religion as a collective mode of adherence to the basic ethical values propells the ethical impulses of the people towards a spiritual unity. In the history of mankind this is the noblest role played by religion. Religion inculcates the fundamental values through external sacred practices. In some cases, the religious practices continue to exist while their ethical presuppositions are comfortably lost. Still, religion plays an important role in propogation of basic virtues and moral practices among people. It is true, religion supports certain social institutions and particular forms of society for the sake of its own survival. It also generates certain power circles and is often used by them as a weapon for wielding power over masses. Here, religion
and politics play a complementary roles. Nevertheless, religion still decisively moulds the moral attitude of its adherents.

Religion as a collective mode of life, necessarily involves an ethical vision and a code of conduct. It is here, the religious scriptures are of moral significance. All the major religions have their own scriptures which embody the moral preachings of their founders and these scriptures offer moral guidance to the adherents. As far as Hinduism is concerned, the *Vedas* stand as the revered sources of morality, both social and religious. As mentioned earlier, the social codes derive, at least theoretically, the major tenets of social justice and righteousness from the *Vedas*. On the other hand, Mimamsakas establish and define religious duties in terms of the absolute authority of the *Vedas*. Thus *dharma*, in both its social and religious aspects, corresponds to the teaching of the *Vedas*.

The above analysis shows that the various denotations of *dharma* are not arbitrary adoptions but are organically connected as the grand classical ethical vision fostered in ancient India. With this understanding of *dharma*, let us now see the conditions which mark the transition from *rta* to *dharma*.

**The Transition**

As noted earlier, the transition was both social and intellectual. The hitherto homogenous Aryan society has taken the subjugated aborigines, who were referred to as dasyus in the *Rg-veda*, into its fold forming the forth caste by name Sudra. The fusion of Aryans and non-Aryans was the greatest event in the social history of Hindu society. This event gave rise to new dimensions in religion, philosophy, economy and most importantly ethics. The *Súdras* who entered the Hindu society as the servile class provided it with necessary material surplus to support its warriors and the intellegentia. The new fourfold social order emerged on the ruins of the original closed communal life of the *Rg-vedie* age. *rta*, the ancient ethical order was dispensed along with the primitive homogenous
communal life. The new order demanded a different theoretical explanation for its establishment. This is precisely the purpose served by the Vedic theories of Creation which mark the beginning of the Vedic speculations.

The observations made by Prof. Keith in this regard have to be mentioned here. Unfortunately, he does not see any point in analysing the Vedic theories of creation and claims that they are of no ethical significance. In his own words, the details of these stupid myths are wholly unimportant: it is enough to note that he (Prajapati) is constantly the creator, the ruler, and the preserver of the world and accepted by every Brähmana of the period as being the lord of the world: he is, it may be added, without any ethical importance. The conception of him is purely intellectual, that of the unity of the universe, and choosing of it Prajapati as the symbol of this unity is one of the striking proofs of the Rig Veda upon the period of Brähmanas. Here, Keith has completely missed the immense significance of myths in understanding the value commitments of a community. Myths are not detached from real life and its social content. For that matter, even the wildest speculations, however abstract they are, can not be totally autonomous from the real life. The reason for this is the inevitability or non-disposability of the real world for man. Man’s thought is neither autonomous nor is devoid of social purpose.

To render the above made point clearer, let us consider whether myths and primitive speculations have any ethical relevance. To do so, we have to pose a naive question to ourselves: why do primitive people generate myths at all? There appear two primary motives for their creating myths. First, they want to explain or answer some riddles of the reality for which they do not have an empirically satisfying answer in hand. Secondly they want to record the most significant events in their social history, the deeds of their celebrities, to perpetuate certain institutions or to admire and cherish certain values. While doing so they nevertheless apply their creative faculties embellishing or adorning

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4 The Religion and Philosophy of The Veda and The Upanisads, p.443.
the basic theme. A major part of their social life with institutional values finds expression in the myths in an intricate form. Myths are thus expressions of their fundamental adjustment to reality, both social and physical, and a means of passing on their value commitments to the following generations. Thus myths have an important sociological function. Myths provide us with important clues as to the modes and development of thought of a community. Hence they come very handy in our understanding the conditions through which sociological and intellectual development takes shape.

Coming to our main analysis, the Rg-vedic hymns of creation serve, in addition to the poets’ zeal to address the riddle of cosmic origin, the important sociological function of explaining contemporary form of society. We find for the first time an allusion to the fourfold caste system in the Purusa Sukta of Tenth Mandala. Again, the conception of the primeval principle of the cosmic origin has a definite influence on the later speculations of the Aryan mind. In what follows, let us have a look at the way the Rg-vedic sages conceive the origin of the world and its influence on the further ontological and ethical speculations in Indian philosophy.

The Unitary Diety Of Creation

The Rg-vedic hymns of creation mark the beginning of theoretical speculations and contain the earliest germs of philosophy. These hymns belong to the latest strata of the Rg-vedic hymns. The most important feature of these hymns is their search for a unitary principle responsible for the whole world. Dhīrgatamas, the seer of I.164, is probably the first poet-philosopher who properly arranged the ontological question:

I ask, unknowing, those who know, the sages, as one all ignorant for the sake of knowledge

What was that One who in the unborn’s image hath established and fixed firm these worlds’ six regions?

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6 the rtav, I.164.6.
The peculiarity of the question is that it already presupposes a unitary principle of creation. The view is further confirmed thus in the oftquoted verse:

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutman

To what is One, sages give many title: they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan

This verse recognizes the One behind all the gods and considers the different gods as nothing but mere names for the One. It asserts the unitary cause of the world on one hand and relegates the gods to mere appelations of the supreme underlying principle on the other hand. The gods are stripped of their peculiar individual devinity. This is a very important development for Hindu religion and philosophy as well. The monistic bent culminated in monotheism in the religion and lead to monistic idealism in the philosophy.

The fundamental assertion of monism by Dhīrgatamas was complemented by some stray guesses at the universal cause attributing it to various gods before the monism reached its zenith in the famous Puruṣa Sūkta. We find Indra, Viśvakarman, Agni, Varuṇa, Brahmanaspati, Dhatar etc. being alluded as the creators. These verses are not of much significance except for that they show an increasing fascination for the idea of creation in the Vedic seers.

The idea of originator of the world is further elucidated in the hymns X.121 and X.130. Here are given some imaginative accounts of the process of creation but the question of the creator-God and His identity was left open. While the former hymn is addressed to Ka which literally means 'who' or 'the unknown God', the latter hymn ends in a sceptical note as to the identity of the creator. It is worth noting that they nevertheless bear a strong theistic bent and mark the development of monotheism.

7 the Rg-veda, 1.164.46
8 cf. the Rg-veda VII.78.7; 85.6 etc.
9 the Rg-veda, X.81.82.
10 the Rg-veda, X.88.3,
11 the Rg-veda, VIII.41.42.
12 the Rg-veda, X.72.1
13 the Rg-veda, X.190
For a fulfilled account of creation we have to turn to the *Purusa Sukta*\(^\text{14}\) which is far developed in content and form. This hymn presents the most developed theory of creation and names the creator 'Puruṣa' whence it got its title. This hymn is more interesting for it is here we find first ever allusion to the four-fold caste system. The hymn conceives Puruṣa as the omnipresent creator with thousand heads, eyes and feet. He is the creator of all that is. He produced Viraj and in turn born to Viraj. Cods and Rishis made the primeval sacrifice with Puruṣa as the victim. They devided Him into four portions and His *mouth* became Brāhma, arms Rajanya, thighs Vaisya and His feet became Śūdra.\(^\text{15}\) Manu and other law-givers borrow this idea of divine origin of the four castes from Purusa Sukta and legitimate their codes for the stratified society.

This hymn also established monotheism in its fulness. Thus this important hymn laid foundation for Hindu social ethics and religion simultaneously. Hence it has far-reaching implications for Hindu thought. The major philosophical contribution of the hymn is its shift in explanation of the universe. While the earlier *Vedic* thought explains the physical world in terms of the working of *ṛta* through various deities, the cosmogonic hymn explains it in terms of unitary all-pervading deity. However, it is not yet free from theism in as much as Puruṣa is still a deity. In the *Brahmanas*, Prajapati is most often mentioned as the progenitor of the mankind and the cretion is attributed to him. The real shift to non-individualistic and non-theistic principle occurs in the Upanisadic speculations where the cosmic individual i.e. Puruṣa is replaced by Brahman, the universal spirit. Nevertheless, the conception of Puruṣa is important as it is the first step towards monism.

**The Individual Soul**

For the development of any ethical theory the conception of the moral agent or the acting individual is central. The idea of moral responsibility and retribution presupposes an individual to whom they are attributed. In Indian philosophy it is *dtman* or the individual soul which stands as the moral agent. There are two exceptions to this generality: Buddhists and Carvakas.

\(^{14}\)*the*Rg-veda*, X.90

\(^{15}\)*ibid.* X.90.12
Buddhists do not accept the existence of an individual soul and are widely criticized for this. Buddhists, due to the absence of ātman, could not develop a proper theory of moral reprisal. For them, thus morality or dharma is only a disposition of mind which takes the place of ātman in their system. Though this disposition has an impact on the future actions of the man, the idea of moral retribution does not occur in Buddhism. Carvakas, on the other hand, deny the existence of a soul other than the body. Soul is a myth for them. The conscious material body stands for individuality in their philosophy. It is for this reason, they do not entertain the idea of moral vindictiveness. Individual is more a hedonistic entity than a moral agent and hence they define good and bad in terms of pleasure or otherwise a thing produces. Human action does not entail any supersensuous moral responsibility except resulting in happiness or its opposite or a mixture of the both. Though Carvakas stop at physical pleasures, Buddhists however recognize certain positive virtues and ethical dispositions to be developed.

Again, the theory of transmigrations which is the most important component in Indian ethics presupposes the concept of individual soul. It is the individual soul that undergoes different births as a result of its own previous deeds and enjoys the fruits of those acts. Without a transmigrating soul, it is very difficult to explain metempsychosis. Buddhism undertakes this difficult task of explaining transmigration without an enduring self. The peculiarity of the Buddhist thesis will be discussed when we deal with its theory of dharma. Further, the Indian theories of liberation and bondage also presuppose the existence of an enduring self. Here too, Buddhism is the sole exception. The Carvakas, along with ātman, do not approve the notions of bondage and liberation. Thus Buddhism and Carvakas stand out as ‘soul-less’ systems with their own peculiarities.

The usage of ātman points back to the Rg-veda where it is used in its primary sense of ‘wind’ and in a modified sense of ‘breath’. The Rg-veda X.92.13 mentions wind as the breath of all and X.168.4 calls Vayu, the wind-god, as the ātman of all the deities. So ātman is conceived as the cause of life or mark of life because body organism without breath is lifeless and devoid

\[16\] The Rg-veda I.34.7, VII.87.2 etc.
of consciousness. Another *Rg-vedic* word for life breath is *asu* which is rarely used. What is peculiar about the *Rg-vedic* conception of *dtman* is that it is very much corporeal. Consider the belief that after death, *dtman* or the breath goes to wind:

The Sun recieve thine eye, the wind thy spirit; go, as thy merit is, to earth or heaven

Go if it be thy lot, unto the waters; go, make thine home in plants with all thy members.

Again, the spirit of a pious man is supposed to reach the heavenly abode of Yama where it enjoys all material pleasures like food and drink and even conjugal bliss. *Atman* acquired the definite sense of 'soul' or 'self in the *Brāhmaṇas* and was distinguished from the vital airs called *prana*. We can see somewhat similar usage in the *Atharva- Veda* which too distinguishes *dtman* from breath and other organs of body. In the later portions of the *Brāhmaṇas*, the concept of *dtman* is found in a well defined form and clearly made autonomous from its other earlier connotations to mean exclusively the 'spirit' or 'self with a reflective insinuation. Here, rudimentary attempts are made to characterise *dtman* either as mind or consciousness awaiting dedicated speculations on the nature of *atman* in the *Upaniṣads*.

In the *Upaniṣads*, *Atman* is deprived of all material qualities and made exactly the opposite to material body in all aspects. It is devoid of form and dimensions and all the qualities of body and is made a real spiritual entity. It is said to be devoid of size, length, shadow, wind, fat, tangibility, taste, smell, organs or parts, name or identity, age and all the material qualities. It appears, the Upanisadlic negative description of *dtman* is arrived at by merely denying the soul all the qualities of a material body. In their anxiety to distinguish spirit from all the material manifestations, they made path-breaking speculations about the nature of *atman*, mostly of negative character. However, *dtman* is positively characterised for once as eternal *aksara* and as the only conscious principle. Here too, it appears they attributed those qualities which they

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17 *The Rg-veda*, I.113.16; 140.18.
18 *The Rg-veda*, X.16.1.
19 *The Satapatha Brahmana*, IV.2.3.1; XI.2.1.2
20 *The Atharva- Veda*, V.1.7; 9.7.
21 *Satapatha Brahmana*, III.8.3.8.
22 *Ibid.* X.3.5.3.
thought matter does not possess. From this they proceeded to the conception of *the absolute* which determined the development of the *Upanisadic* philosophy in its entirety. We will come to this point a little later. We shall also see its impact on *dharma* in its formation.

**Transmigration**

As mentioned earlier, the theory of transmigration presupposes an individual soul which undergoes it. Though the idea of *atman* was developed more in the *Brahmanas*, the notion of transmigration in its naive form could be traced back to the eschatological beliefs recorded in the *Rg-veda*. What happens to man after death is fundamental question which gave rise to varied eschatological systems in all the primitive cultures of the world. Different answers were attempted in the *Rg-veda* for this question leading to the detailed theory of transmigration in the later speculative thought.

For the *Rg-vedic* people, life on earth is so precious and enjoyable that they repeatedly asked for longer lives on earth and even immortality:

A hundred autumns may we see that bright Eye *Surya*, *Cod*-ordained arise:
A hundred autumns may we live
May this rite save me till my hundredth autumn. Preserve us ye Gods, with blessings

Here I erect this rampart for the living; let none of those reach this limit
May they survive hundred autumns, may they bury Death beneath the mountain.
Live your full lives and find oldage delightful, all of you striving one behind the other
Correspondingly, death (*Mrityu*) and disintegration (*nirriti*) are feared as evident from various hymns in which death is wished away. Here are a few quoteworthy:

Give us not up as a prey to death, 0 *Soma*: still let us look upon sun arising
Let our oldage with passing days be kindly. Let Nirriti depart to distant places!

0 *Asuniti*, keep the breath within us, and make the days we have to live yet longer

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24 The *Rg-veda*, VII.66.16
25 *Ibid*. VII.101.6
27 *Ibid*. X.18.6
Grant that we still look upon the sunlight: strengthen the body with the oil we bring thee.

The beginnings of eschatology in the Rg-vedic period are connected with Yama, the later God of Death. In the Rg-veda, Yama is regarded as the first mortal died who found a place in the Heaven for the pious mortals. The Fathers of antiquity are supposed to be in the enjoyable company of Yama who hosts them. Yama is thus revered as the King of the Dead:

Yama first found for us a place to dwell in: this pasture never can be taken from us.

Men born on earth tread their own paths that lead them where our ancient Fathers have departed.

The abode of Yama was described as the most delightful place where Yama constantly puts the dead in comfort with food and drink. The priestly imagination about the Heaven culminated in detailed description of it in the Brâhmaṇas, and further taken to its heights in the Pauranic literature. In the Rg-veda, the poets wish to attain immortality in the realm of Yama:

0 Pavamana, place me in that deathless, undecaying world wherein the light of heaven is set. and everlasting lusture shines. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra’s sake.

Make me immortal in that realm where dwells the King, Vivasvan’s son.

Where is the secret shrine of heaven, where are those waters young and fresh. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra’s sake.

Make me immortal in that realm where happiness transports, where Joys and felicities combine, and longing wishes are fulfilled. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra’s sake.

The Spirit of the Dead

The spirit of the dead is addressed to reach the abode of Yama safely and to enjoy the pleasurable company of Yama and the forefathers who had already been there:

"Meet Yama, meet the Fathers, meet the merit of free or ordained acts, in highest heaven.

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28 Ibid. X.59.4-5. Asunitris the god of funerals
29 The Rg-veda. X.14.2. cf. The Atharva-Veda III. 28.5.
30 The Rg-veda. IX.113.7-11
Leave sin or evil, seek anew thy dwelling, and bright with glory wear another body".\textsuperscript{31}

Here emerges an important question: can everyone dead go to heaven? This is a crucial question because an answer to it has far-reaching echoes in the future ethical thought of India.

The answer is 'well, not everyone but only the pious dead can reach heaven'. This seemingly simple answer decisively influenced the formation of the Indian theories of transmigration, Karma and Dharma. Let us see how.

The path to heaven is not easy to tread. It is guarded by twin Suramas, the four-eyed ferocious dogs (cf. The \textit{Rg-veda} X.14.11) Yama prayed to help the pious spirits with the favour of the two dogs in their journey to heaven.

The idea that only the pious ones, who have done good works on earth, are capable of attaining heaven goes long way. What else are the good works for the \textit{Rg-vedic} Aryan except yajñas? This notion of good works i.e., yajñas leading one to heaven gained strength in the Brdhmanas and the ultimate aims of yajñā is conceived as attainment of heaven. Here we find a shift of ends. Earlier, the primary purpose of yajñā was to uphold \textit{Rta} and please gods and now it is to attain heaven.

The crucial point to note here is that the element of retribution has entered for good as the most influencing precept into Indian moral thought. Heaven as a retribution for good works has on one hand enhanced performance of yajñā and on the other hand lead to the notion that every act has its retribute.

Not only attaining heaven but Sojourn there is also conceived as an effect of good acts. The continuance of the pious spirits in heaven depends on their good acts on the earth.

The departed one meets with 'the merit of ordained or free acts' in the heaven which helps one continue there. Yajñas and gifts to priests (ista-purta) and gods prolong one's stay in heaven:

"Offer Yama holy gifts enriched with butter, and draw near:

So may he grant that we may live long days of life among fathers".\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31}The \textit{Rg-veda}, X.14.8
\textsuperscript{32}The \textit{Rg-veda}, X.14.14
As the stay in heaven is a result of good acts, it is natural that it lasts as long as the merit lasts. The balance of merit diminishes as one's stay gets longer just as our vanity bag becomes lighter with our continued stay in a star hotel. As actions have temporal conditioning, so do their results. Longer stay in the heaven exhausts one's accumulated merit. (cf. Taittariya Samhita, ii.6.10.2).

What happens once the merit is exhausted? The stay ceases.... it moans death there. This is called re-death or punar-mrityu. yajnas performed for the favour of ancestors by their progeny are supposed to help the dead continue their heavenly sojourn:

"Thou, Jatavedas, knowest well the number of Fathers who are here and who are absent. of fathers who we know and whom we know not : accepts the sacrifice well prepared with portions". 33

In the Brdhmanas, detailed yajnas are prescribed to avert punar-mrityu34. However, even these acts cannot ensure eternal stay in heaven. Hence one is bound to die in the heaven after the merit is exhausted.

Where does the soul go after the re-death? Where else but, to the earth the business of which it is familiar with? —And we got transmigration! The theory of transmigration envisages re-birth, on the earth, of the soul after experiencing the fruits of its past deeds in the other world. With every re-birth, new actions and their merit accrue and the cycle goes on.

This theory of metempsychosis gains clear articulation in the Upanisads. The Chandogya Upaniṣad gives a curiously naive theory as to how the souls take re-birth after the end of their stay in the heaven:

"Having dwelt there till their (good) works are consumed, they return again that way as they came, to the ether, from ether to the air. Then the sacrificer, having become air, becomes smoke, having become smoke, he becomes mist.

Having become mist, he becomes a cloud, he rains down. Then he is born as rice and corn.

33 The Rg-veda, X. 15.13
34 cf. Taittariya Brahmana 3.11.8.5; Kausitakiya Brahmana, XXV.1; and Satapatha Brahmana, 12.9.3.12
herbs and trees, sesamum and beans. From thence the escape is beset with most difficulties. For whoever the persons may be that eat the food, and beget offspring, he henceforth becomes like unto them.

Those whose conduct has been good, will quickly attain some good birth, the birth of a Brāhmaṇa, or a Ksatriya or a Vaisya. But those whose conduct has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, or a hog or a Chandala”35.

The theory of soul raining down is without a demur a naive conjecture but what is really noteworthy here is that one's birth and caste are a result of one's past deeds. This is the strongest force in the theory of transmigration which entails drastic social implications.

The theory of metempsychosis along with the causal connection between acts and future condition finds expression in almost all the Upaniṣads with negligible variations. Upaniṣads add knowledge as another determinant of future birth. One's level of consciousness and dispositions are said to affect his future life. Knowledge and deeds appear together as moulding one’s future life:

"... and according to his deeds and according to his knowledge he is born again".

"Then both his knowledge and his work take hold of his and his acquaintance with former things”36.

And as a caterpillar, after having reached the end of a blade of grass, and after having made another approach (to another blade) draws itself together towards it, thus does this self, after having thrown off this body and dispelled all ignorance, and after making another approach (to another body) draw himself to beger towards it”37.

The theory of transmigration finds place in the entire spectrum of Indian thought with a negligible exception of Carvakas. It is really wonderful to see that such primitive eschatological belief finds place in all the major systems.

The central notion in the theory of re-birth is the inevitable moral consequences of moral

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35 Chandogya Upanisad, V. 10.5-7; cf. also Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, VI. 2.16, IV. 4.6, III. 2.13
36 Kaushitakiya Upaniṣad I.2
37 Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, IV. 4.2-3
action. Action or *Karma* is understood as the driving force in the series of lives which constitute the moral career of an individual soul. All the systems of Indian philosophy treat the issue of moral action with utmost care and in consonance with their metaphysical and epistemological commitments. Now, let us see how the idea of *Karma* is developed in the *Vedic* thought.

**Karma**

The germs of *Karma* are embedded in the eschatological belief which ensured the prolonged heavenly life, after death, as a result of good acts. The efficacy of good acts or *hta-pūrta* i.e., *yajña* (*iṣṭa*) and gifts to priests (*piṛta*) is the forerunner for *Karma* theory. Thus *Iṣṭapūrta* can said to be the earliest form of *Karma*.

*Iṣṭapūrta*, the merit of good deeds, proceeds to heaven before the soul reaches there. It helps the soul to stay there according to its volume. In *Taittariya Brāhmaṇa*, Nachiketas seeks that his store of good deeds may never decay. (*Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa, iii. U.S.*).

The ethical and spiritual significance of *Karma* is explicated in the *Upaniṣads*. In *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, a discussion as to what remains after death takes place between Yajñavalkya and Artabhaga. They confer in secret and it is said that what they conversed about was *Karma* and what they commended was *Karma*. (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, IV. 4.2) Yajñavalkya explains the process of *Karma* thus:

"To whatever objects a man's own mind is attached, to that he goes strenuously together with his deed; and having obtained the end (the last results) of whatever deed he does here on earth, he returns again from that world (which is the temporary reward of his deed) to this world of action". (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* IV. 4.6).

"...Man becomes good by good work and bad by bad work".

*Karma*, right from the beginning, is connected with transmigration. Sometimes it appears as if the theory of metempsychosis is a logical offshoot of the retributive theory of action.

The moral intelligibility of an action is a primary concern of any ethical reflection. Certain actions give immediate results while others bear fruit a little later. Certain actions, especially

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38 *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* IV. 4.13
moral ones, appear to be fruitless. In such case, it is difficult to promote the moral behaviour. Moral reinforcement can be made only when moral actions are shown to have consequences, now or later, which affect the agent directly or indirectly.

The question 'why should one be moral?' needs an answer. An action is not morally meaningful if it is futile or fruitless. Thus ethical reason necessitates certain consequences to be attached to every morally meaningful action. When an action cannot be shown as having results in this world, the results should be posited in the other world, if not in this life, in the next life.

With reference to future life, we can render meaningfulness to even those actions which hardly appear to be of any consequence here. Thus, the actions which are apparently non-consequential logically necessitate another life in which they come to fruition. Moral retribution thus entails a future life for the agent. If moral actions are deprived of consequences, the whole edifice of a moral system collapses. People would not take pains to observe moral rules or principles which are of no consequences.

Further, *Karma* explains the inequalities in human condition in a moral way. It attributes present social, economic and spiritual condition of a man to his past deeds and anticipates his future according to his present deeds. Thus the whole human situation is moralized. Fatalism is avoided and man is made a product of his own deeds. However, it presupposes an infinite series pastward and futureward. This leads to an important ethics of transcendence — the ethics of *moksha*.

**Moksha - the Ultimate Ethical Ideal**

*Moksha* is fundamentally the release from the series of transmigratory lives which the soul undergoes as a result of its own actions. *Moksha* is thus cessation of continuous mortality. It is the attainment of immortality of the soul where it rests with itself.

How to attain this freedom from unceasing process of metempsychosis? As actions are the cause of transmigration, release from it cannot be effected by actions. Rather, performance of actions with an interest in their consequences should be stopped in order to prepare oneself
for the release. Then what brings out the freedom from transmigratory life? It is something qualitatively different from action and exertion, . . . it is wisdom....wisdom of a special kind.

What constitutes this wisdom which is supposed to save one from the multifold mortal life. It is not the knowledge of external objects which leads to action, possession, enjoyment and loss. But it is the knowledge of the inner self and its identity with the universal self. It is the knowledge of unity of being into which all duality and diversity merge. In that sense, it is not even knowledge, for it has no subject-object distinction.

The individual self (ātman) realizes its identity with universal self (Brahman). In this awareness, the world is dispelled as an illusion with its duality and diversity.

The term Brahman is used in the Rg-veda to denote prayer or spell. (cf. The Rg-veda X, 162). In the Brāhmaṇas, the brahminical prayer is given exaggerated eminence and Brahman is equated with Prajapati, the Creator. The notion that everything is a product of prayer seems to be emphasized. Brahman is also identified with Brīhaspati, the lord of prayer. Brahman is identified with speech, truth, Rta all the deities are said to enter into and emerge from Brahman. (cf. Aitareya Brahmaṇa VIII. 28).

Brahman attained the status of a metaphysical principle with the conception of Brahman as Svayambhu. The self-existent, self-supporting cause of the universe.

In the Upanisads, Brahman is further given the spiritualistic treatment and He is considered as the universal soul. The Upaniṣads dilate a lot upon the nature of Brahman as the ultimate reality. The final twist in the consideration of Brahman comes with the proposed identity of Brahman with ātman, the individual self. The knowledge of such identity of Brahman and ātman is said to effect liberation from mundane worldly life and transmigratory existence.

Before we discuss nature of the emancipatory knowledge and the nature of freedom it affects, we need to pay attention to another important question — what is ethical about mokṣa?

Mokṣa hardly appears to have anything to do with ethics, far less an ethical ideal. The common place understanding of mokṣa is that the speculative grandeur of the Upaniṣadic thinkers.

\(^{39}\)cf. Tattvārtha Brahmana ii. 8.8.8; Aitareya Brahmaṇa. i. 19.1; Kausitakiya Brahmaṇa VIII. 4; Satapatha Brahmaṇa Xi. 2.3, etc.
posited a universal being underlying the whole reality and a mystical identity of individual soul with it is sought after.

This understanding of mokṣa is partial and misses the ethical aspect of mokṣa. It is true that the concept of Brahman is used as the ultimately reality with which identity is sought. This identity not only releases individual from transmigratory life but makes him transcend all moral considerations. Transcending world of affairs is transcending moral realm. Thus, it is claimed, mokṣa is not merely non-moral but amoral.

This construal of mokṣa is not without a basis. The Upaniṣads themselves time and again declare that in mokṣa, moral actions do not affect one:

"And he who knows me thus, by no deed of his is his life harmed, not by the murder of his mother, not by the murder of his father, not by theft, not by the killing of a Brahman."

"...He moves about there laughing (or eating), playing, and rejoicing (in his mind), be it with women, carriages, or relatives, never minding that body into which he is born."

The outspoken indifference to morality instigates even a scholar like A.B.Keith to observe:

"The defect of the Upaniṣads is that they render morality in the ultimate issue valueless and meaningless."

However, it is quite a misconstrual of the Vedic ideal of mokṣa. One who attains mokṣa, it is true, is said to transcend all duality. Because all actions involve duality, the emancipated also transcends all actions moral or otherwise. Thus he raises above mundane activity which includes morality. To emphasize this transcendence, it is said that even evil deeds would not affect him. This however does not mean that a Mukta (the emancipated) is necessarily amoral or anti-moral. On the other hand it only means that he cannot undertake evil deeds or, to be more specific, he cannot be amoral.

Mokṣa is not an evil doer’s cup of tea. One has to strictly attain moral excellence before one aims at mokṣa. There is no short-cut to it. Moral training of mind is a necessary condition

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40 Kausitaki Brahmana Upanisad, iii.1
41 Chandogya Upanisad, V.12-3
42 The Religion and philosophy of the Veda, P.396
even for receiving knowledge of Brahm. The secret teaching of Brahm is only endowed to one who is worthy (morally too) of receiving it:

"But no one should tell it to anybody else, even if he gave him the whole sea-girt earth, full of treasure, for this doctrine is worth more than that, yea, it is worth more."43.

Along with knowledge (gnosis), self-discipline (askesis) is recognized as a path to mokṣa. Indeed, both of them are complimentary.

Self discipline as practiced through observation of self-mortification, religious duties and psycho-physical discipline (yoga). This constitutes the preparatory stage in the process of seeking mokṣa. The moral excellence is necessary for a Mumuksu (mokṣa-seeker). The Upanisads are not at all ambiguous about this. One should overcome evil in order to be fit, for mokṣa:

"He therefore that knows it, after having become quiet, subdued, satisfied, patient and collected, sees self in self, sees all as self. Evil does not overcome him, he overcomes evil. Evil does not burn him but he burns evil. Free from evil, free from spots, free from doubt, he becomes a (true) Brahmaṇa; this is the Brahma-world, O king"45.

Mokṣa does not come along with mere apprehension of the identity of self with Brahm. It is rather living such a belief. Such process of believing cannot be achieved unless one raises above mundane pleasures and aims at a higher level of self-consciousness:

"The good and pleasant approach man: the wise goes round about them and distinguishes them. Yea, the wise prefers the good to the pleasant but the fool choses the pleasant through greed and avarice"46.

Not yielding to pleasures or sacrificing certain pleasures is a primary condition for any moral exertion. If one is guided only by pleasures, one cannot achieve higher ends of morality. Pleasures often, if not always, lead one astray and distort one from one's destiny. The Upanisads emphasize this point and goods one to gain control over senses in order not to succumb to pleasures. In Katha Upanisad, this idea is brought to bear figuratively thus:

43 Chandogya Upanisad III. 11.5
44 cf. K. Satchindananda Murthy, Metaphysics, Man and Freedom, Lecture II
45 Brhadāranyaka Upanisad IV. 4.23
46 Katha Upanisad, i. 2.2
"Know the self to be sitting in the chariot, the body to be chariot, the intellect (buddhi) the charioteer, and the mind reins.

The senses they call the horses, the object of the senses their roads. When the (the highest self) is in union with the body, the senses, and the mind, then wise people call him 'the enjoyer'".

He who has no understanding and whose mind (the reins) is never firmly held, his senses (horses) are unmanageable, like vicious horses of a charioteer.

But he who has understanding and whose mind is always firmly held, his senses are under control, like good horses of a charioteer.

He who has no understanding, who is unmindful and always impure, never reaches that place, but enters into the round of births.

But he who has understanding, who is mindful and always pure, reaches indeed that place from whence he is not born again"47.

The above observation made in the Katha Upaniṣad makes it beyond doubt, clear that immoral person, or one who has no control over passions and urges would never attain mokṣa. One should purify one's thoughts and make oneself fit for the highest goal:

"For thoughts alone cause the round of births, let a man strive to purify his thoughts. What a man thinks, he is: this is the old secret"48.

Not only the negative morality of subduing senses but even positive moral characteristics of liberality, righteousness, kindness, truthfulness are said to be developed by one interested in mokṣa. (cf. Chandogya Upaniṣad-III.17.4). Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad instructs - Damyata (be subdued!), Datta (give!) and Damadam (be merciful!) - as positive virtues.

Hence, the ideal of mokṣa cannot be understood as value-neutral or amoral but to be taken as a process aiming at moral excellence.

Another major misconception about mokṣa is that it is a negative ideal. It is negative in the sense that it is freedom from misery.... misery of real life.

47 Katha Upaniṣad, I. 3.3-8
48 Maitrayana Brahmana Upaniṣad, VI. 34.3
Mokṣa is often described as release from the misery of transmigratory life. It is a spiritual solution to the pessimistically construed human life. The Upaniṣadic thinkers are accused of emphasizing the darker side of life and coming out with mystical transcendence of concrete reality. Mokṣa is an ideal of spiritual escape of a wandering mendicant who lost hope of all pleasures.

This view is also infested with partial incognizance. It is true that worldly pleasures are often dismissed as unworthy for one who seeks liberation. Indulgence in worldly affairs and being engrossed by immediate selfish purposes are dissuaded. At a few places, renunciation from worldly affairs is recommended. The exuberance for longer life which is found in the Rgveda is certainly missing in the Upaniṣads but we should recollect, that, the urge for immortality is even stronger in the case of mokṣa. Nonetheless, there is qualitative difference. The former was a strong desire of a poet and the latter is a speculative grandeur of a philosopher.

It has to kept in mind that no Upaniṣad debunks the moral significance of family life and social life. Renunciation was not a rule but an exception. In the Taittiriya Upaniṣad, positive morality is taught to a out-going studen. (Taittiriya Upaniṣad. I. 11.1-5). He is instructed to have progeny and have a virtuous social life. The gist of Upaniṣadic morality is a caution not to be swerved by passions and desires.

Though human life is viewed as involving misery, disease, oldage and death, this is not absolute pessimism. People are not asked to commit suicide or run to forests. Even a mendicant is supposed to involve in social and moral life of the people by advising and helping lay man in their practical lives. It is not a coincidence that many of the Sanyāsins practice native medicine. Renunciation is nothing but extention of oneself. Every other being is viewed as an extention of one's own self. It is self-denial for a greater harmony, social and spiritual.

Again, mokṣa as freedom is not merely a negative one. It is not just freedom 'from' but also freedom 'for' positive attainment of unity, integrity and bliss.

\[\text{cf. Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad III. 5.1}\]
'Unity of Being' is a major objective of ancient metaphysical systems, Indian or non-Indian. Through the unitary and non-dualistic conception of Brahman, the Upaniṣadic thinkers achieved the unification of reality in one grand principle. Deussen rightly remarks:

"Eternal philosophical truth has seldom found more decisive and striking expression than in the emancipating knowledge of the ātman".50

Any metaphysical system attempts at attaining a unitary principle capable of gratifying the fundamental urge of human beings for freedom from lower mode of existence and freedom to rise to higher levels of being. This is the central issue of any emancipating philosophy ... may it be that of Plato, Hegel, Marx or Sartre.

In India, the function of philosophy is viewed not as analysis or explanation but as emancipation. Thus all the Indian schools of thought claim their philosophy as capable of emancipating.

The emancipation is release from finitude and freedom into infinity. Everything found around man is limited finite and binding. The undying urge to overcome the finitude of human condition finds expression in search for infinite possibilities or possible infinity. This search for infinity makes all experience of finite miserable and posits bliss in the infinite. Mokṣa is fundamentally the attempt to rise above finitude:

"The infinite (bhūman) is bliss. There is no bliss in anything finite. Infinite only is bliss. This infinity, however, we must desire to understand.

Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, understand nothing else, that is infinite. Where one sees something else, hears something else, understands something else, that is finite. The infinite is immortal, the finite is mortal".51

The infinity has to be searched or found not in external reality which is bound by space and time but in the fathoms of inner self which shows possibility of transcending all limitations.

Further, mokṣa consists in elimination of false consciousness of individuality ... release from ego-centric activity. In mokṣa, one identifies oneself with higher universal self and looks at

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50 Philosophy of Upanisads P.38
51 Chandogyapana, VII. 23, VII. 24.1
everything dispassionately, not as an agent or benefactor but as a witness. This is not inaction or indifference but a higher moral attitude. This is even above the enlightened self interest which is often praised in the western ethics. This is ethics of the absolute.

In the light of the above analysis, it is established that moksa is not, just a spiritual ideal but has a moral dimension to it. The moral virtues of self-discipline, righteousness, kindness, liberality, truthfulness, humility are entailed by moksa which is the process of attaining ultimate unity, freedom, perfection, infinity and positive moral identity.

**Dharma and its Significance**

*Dharma* as the ethical order is intricately connected with the notions of individual soul, action, retribution, transmigratory life and freedom. *Dharma* is the autonomous order in which every action of an agent is retributed in the series of lives undergone by a soul which might attain final release in the unification with *Brahman*, the universal self.

*Dharma* in this sense is adopted by all the systems. Even Buddhism which denies the existence of soul as a separate entity, accepts transmigratory efficacy of moral actions.

Though different systems have varied opinion as to the nature of *Dharma* as the moral merit, all of them accept it. The reasons behind this universal acceptance of *Dharma* appears to be:

1. Its retributive character — all the systems must accept this lest they endorse moral chaos.

2. Its autonomy from external agencies — even atheistic systems accept *Dharma* for it does not require god or any external power for its operation.

3. Its opposition to fatalism — *Dharma* makes one architect of one's own destiny and thus appeals to logic of moral responsibility. It lays greater stress on voluntary moral actions.

4. Its explanatory potential — *Dharma* morally explains human condition with all its diversities and inequalities.

5. Its comprehensive character — *Dharma* more or less logically explains the social, religious and spiritual aspects of human life. Any human phenomenon can be explained in the light of
6. Its popularity — the popular acceptance of Dharma helps it finding a place for it in every system. It is observable that many sutras start with analysis of Dharma.

In what follows, we will be dealing with three important texts — Manu Smrti, Mimamsa Sūtras and Bhagavad-gītā which explicate the social, religious and spiritual dimensions of Dharma respectively.

Dharma in the sphere of social conduct forms the central thesis of Manu Smrti. Mimamsa Sūtras come out with stupendous philosophical system to justify Dharma as religious duty. Gītā gives a spiritualistic treatment to Dharma in its profound teaching. A proper study of these three texts enable us understand Dharma and its nature comprehensively.