Conclusion

Dharma has been an important topic of discussion in the brahmanical discourse on social structure. The chief premise of this discourse was that there was a golden age when nothing could go wrong. They explained the importance of dharma through the device of yugas – the kṛta, the tretā, the dvaipāra and the kali. The kṛtyuga was so called because dharma was unblemished in this age. With each successive yugas, dharma got steadily eroded and in the kaliyuga it would be literally on one its last foot. The kaliyuga was deemed to be the worst among the four yugas, for complete disorder would prevail in this age.

It is important to clarify that this thesis is not concerned with the social-structure of that time as it was, nor is it a commentary on dharma and adharma. Instead it interprets dharma in the brāhmanical texts, specially in the Mahābhārata, as expressive of a brāhmanical discourse on social order. The text is regarded as a reflection of a specific socio-historical worldview of the brāhmaṇas, which developed roughly between the fourth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. This period is marked by the crystallization of the brāhmanical discourse on dharma, and its codification in the Dharmaśāstras and the epics. We are aware that the śāstras remained fluid for a long time and writing the texts helped brāhmaṇism to evolve, formulate and establish its discourse on dharma.

The focus of this thesis is on the textual reading, and to discover the ways in which dharma was perceived and classified in the Mahābhārata, which was accepted as reflective of the dominant brāhmanical discourse on normative regulations. We have avoided studying the text as repository of historical facts. Instead, our main emphasis is on the appropriation and interpretation of the text and not on the ‘historical facts’ per se. Although it would have been interesting to read the text through its layers, we could not do so for technical problems. The scholars have attempted the bring out the layers of the Mahābhārata, but so far we do not have any unanimously accepted study of the same. Therefore, we study the text as a summation of the worldview of the brāhamaṇa ideologues till the fourth century A.D.

Even though the Mahābhārata contains illustration of dharma becoming adharma and vice versa, depending upon time and situation, the ‘ideals’ were set and fixed. At the same time, the expounders of dharma realized that an unbending, fixed and unalterable precept is bound to become redundant with the passage of time, because
society cannot stand frozen in time. Hence, occasionally they talk of dharma being relative to yuga and deśa. However, the differences were accommodated as long as they did not disturb the ‘ideal’ social fabric. Dilemmas and conflicts were bound to arise in the ever-changing world of man, which becomes all the more evident in the Mahābhārata, since the epic represents the ideas of nearly eight hundred years. It appears, from the obsessive fear of the kaliyuga, that new forces had already started adversely affecting the ‘ideal’ social structure of brahmanical society. Dharma had a two-fold task to accomplish in this period of crisis. Firstly, it had to re-establish the glory of bygone days. Secondly, it had to accommodate several changes without upsetting the ‘ideal’ social order. The attempt was to reaffirm the grandeur of brahmanical society in a not so amicable environment. Although dharma was an unalterable principle, it could not ignore the changes. This inevitably led to a sort of crisis, which has been elaborately discussed under the title “kaliyuga”.

The above observation is supported by the provision of apaddharma. It constituted an important category of dharma. According to this special classification, a man was lawfully permitted to transgress the rules of his varṇa. Such digressions were not to perturb the general functioning of society in an otherwise restraining social system. However, this provision was devised only for male dvijas. Moreover, a man was commanded to get back to his dharma as soon as normalcy returned, for it was meant only for the period of crisis. This privilege did not extend to a sudra or to a woman. The Dharmaśāstakaras do not give any explanation for this discrimination. It is understood that transgression of dharma by them was considered more dangerous for the social fabric than by the upper varṇas. Apaddharma appears, and sometimes it does appear, to be nothing more than an escape route for the rich and powerful, who could lead a comfortable life when the going got tough for the others. It is significant to note that even the king was not allowed to avail himself of this facility. Perhaps, his position as the upholder of dharma was too crucial to permit him to indulge in such transgression, for a transgressor could hardly be expected to prevent or set back transgression.

As mentioned earlier, a woman was not lucky enough to enjoy apaddharma. She was expected to abide by her strīdharma, come what may. She was portrayed as an evil incarnate, a root of all problems. She was told to be a major cause of adharma on the earth. Hence it was important to guard, guide and goad her towards dharma because society could not do without an ideal woman. The experts maintained that a greater effort was required to establish strīdharma, for a woman was considered to be naturally
inclined towards adharma because of her svabhāva. Therefore a man was made responsible for her virtues as she could neither cultivate them herself, nor could she protect them on her own. A woman, being the soul of the family and society, must be indoctrinated with all the virtues that were useful to the family and society. It was not so difficult to bring a woman to submission as she was deprived of her power, and was subordinated economically and socially to her husband. Man controlled her productivity and reproductivity. Chastity was enforced upon her for economic and social reasons, since each man ought to be authenticated as a son of his proper father. Glorification of feminine attributes and condemnation of strīsvabhāva was adopted as an effective tool to compel a woman to adapt herself exactly to the role society has forced upon her. However, all women did not follow the rules all the time. Some were endowed with fortitude, but their fortitude only re-established the same patriarchal order, which these strong women appeared to attack in the beginning. These rules were not applicable to the women outside the brahmanical society. They could and did behave in a markedly different fashion without being projected as devils. It is interesting to learn that some women, even within the brahmānical society, evaded the customary rules but such cases were the exception, and it is exceptions that prove the rule. Moreover the life-sketch of different types of women could have helped brahmanism to spread its ideas of the ideal and evil woman, hence the narratives were included in the epic. The law-givers considered it important to control the activities of women, for only then could they ensure the purity of the varṇa and lineage.

Maintenance of varṇāśramadharma was considered too crucial to be left to the mercy of imperfect human beings. Therefore, a king was appointed to check any digressions that occurred. The continual injunctions to the king to ensure that varṇāsaṁkara did not occur indicate that such confusion was an ever-present danger in the mind of the brahmana ideologues. Indeed, his role was the most significant in the maintenance of dharma. A good king spared no effort to maintain the purity of the varṇas, for varṇāsaṁkara was a special feature of the kaliyuga. The king was empowered to maintain and establish righteousness, and also to punish the law-breakers. However, he was the master of all but the brahmana. It would appear from the legends that the brahmana was the real ruler, and the king merely a follower of his orders. While admitting that the brahmana and kṣatriya could not prosper without each other the law-givers were careful to point out that in such an alliance the former always stood out as the superior partner. An ill-disposed king could not produce any adverse effect on the
brāhmaṇa, although the reverse could occur if the king neglected the importance of the brahmana. Indeed, the Mahābhārata is full of stories where renowned kings were reduced to an ignoble status because they invited the wrath of the brahmana. Time and again it was reiterated that a king should not take his throne for granted for he could be deposed any time if he failed to fulfill his obligations. However the ‘real’ kings do not appear to be so powerless. They took their decisions personally and many a time they decided against the advice of their purohita. It is another matter that at times their judgment led them to doom, but they did stick to their resolution having once made it. A strong king was always a check on the conduct of the brahmanas, just as the brahmanas were a check on the conduct of the king. A king was constantly reminded that he was provided with dānḍa to rule judiciously and he obtained great merit when he secured the safety and prosperity of his subjects. Conversely, when a king misbehaved he lost everything, including his life. A king could bring order or chaos in his kingdom. He was the cause of a yuga. The great Mahābhārata war itself was an outcome of a king’s conduct.

Last, but not the least, varṇāśramadharma was categorized as the core of a social order. In fact, all other categories were devised only to preserve and protect varṇāśramadharma. In keeping with their interest, the brahmana legal writers constantly theorized on social relationship and behaviour-pattern, which would strengthen their position in a changing social system. The constraints of additive changes appear to have raised a conflicting situation both within and outside the brahmanical society. It was this crisis, which appears to have caused a persistent theory known as svadharma. Varṇa was made a reference-point for access to legal rights, religious rites and acquisition of wealth etc. Indeed the gravity of one’s misbehaviour was not judged by one’s acts, but by one’s varṇa. In other words, different punishments were prescribed for different varṇas for the same offence. It was consistently argued that one’s own duty, though devoid of merit was preferable to the duty of another, well performed. Even death, in the performance of one’s duty, brought blessedness. No crime was thought to be as grave as the violation of one’s varṇadharm. A man who digressed from his varṇadharm was to be given severe punishment, for his unruly behaviour could hasten the arrival of the kāliyuga – the most frightful of ages man had ever experienced. The restriction was more stringent in case of the lower two varṇas. The very idea of the vaiśya and the Śūdra discarding their prescribed occupation made the law-givers panicky for, as they stated, if these two varṇas swerved from their duties this world would be thrown into confusion.
However, occasionally we do find passages, which eulogize a man’s inherent virtues rather than his birth. According to these passages, a sudra, possessing the qualities of a brāhmaṇa, was to be defined as a brāhmaṇa; and if a brāhmaṇa lacked the avowed qualities he was to be regarded as a śūdra. There could be two possibilities behind this ambivalence. The editors of the Mahābhārata had to prove that brahmanism was not as orthodox as the heterodox sects labelled it to be, or these views may be a reflection of the views of two different sections of people, distant in time and space. There are many characters in the Mahābhārata who acted contrary to their varṇadharma, and interestingly, they were never thrown out of the varṇa-system. This may be an admission of the fact that despite its rigid rules dharma was flexible enough to accommodate differences.

This ambivalence becomes more evident in the case of āśramadharma. We are told that there were four āśramas, but all were not of equal importance. The law-givers acclaimed the order of the householder as the best of the four orders because it is from this source that all the three remaining orders derived their subsistence. Even though saṁnyāsa was included in the four-fold division, the majority could never reconcile to the idea of renunciation. Perhaps it was included as part of the āśrama system to defeat the rising heterodox sects on their own grounds, and to prove that brāhmaṇism had everything that others were proud of. But saṁnyāsa was certainly not the most valued āśrama, for it negated the social function of gṛhastha. The outward symbols (viz. celibacy, non-production, no-rituals etc.) by which a renouncer was recognized were often anathema to brāhmaṇical orthodoxy. A man’s primary duty was to fulfill his social obligations. He could obtain three goals out of four only within gṛhasthāśrama. Hence, he could not aim to attain mokṣa without attaining dharma, artha and kāma. Indeed, a good gṛhastha surpassed the merits of a samnyasīn. The law-givers, however, did not totally ignore renunciation and some of the characters of the epic did obtain great merits, though they never entered the stage of the householder.

To sum up, dharma being an all-encompassing term provided brāhmaṇism with an answer for all the problems when no law, no recipe, no reasoning and no example could any longer inspire man to accept its greatness. Dharma unfolded the dialectic of socio-cultural changes with its emphasis on a stable social order. It had the potential to retain those ideas as well, which were not necessarily supportive of the orthodox brahmanical order. Different views, different norms and different customs assert that society, which is depicted in the epic, is not culturally homogenous. The heterogeneous
character of culture, which was perceived as social disorder, compelled the brāhmaṇa ideologues to reinforce the importance of homogeneity, which was being popularised as social order, so that brāhmaṇism could resurrect and re-establish itself. Representing an oral tradition, the epic was composed over a long time span and was written and compiled many centuries later. Because of this, there are various and contradictory definitions and practices which are contained in it. It is this variety which has made dharma and Mahābhārata interesting and intriguing. We made an endeavour to study some of the dimensions of dharma in the Mahābhārata and found out that what appears to be a contradiction is rather an admission that the epic represents a polymorphous culture. Brāhmaṇism could not have found a better instrument than dharma to re-establish itself. This thesis demonstrates that an attempt was made to standardize dharma through the medium of the Dharmaśāstras and the epics. However, this standardization did not always translate into vyavahāra.